The Return

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No Archive Warnings Apply

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The Return

by lurkinglurkerwholurks

Summary

What the comics neglected to cover after Bruce returns from being lost in time.

——Can be read as a standalone——

Chapter 1: Tim

Chapter Notes

> Beautiful opening chapter fanart courtesy of @ky-landfill on Tumblr!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The glass should have kept him anchored. Though the room was comfortable, the glass had been chilled, the temperature sending a rippling shock through his body as he pressed his hand flat against the barrier.

The chill had been a perverse comfort. It made the glass feel real, which made *him* feel real, even if it only lasted the length of his arm.

Too little had felt real over the past six months.

The glass wasn't cold anymore. Where it met his skin, the barrier had warmed into equilibrium, leaving him with little more than the sensation of pressure keeping him in place. Tim leaned forward and pressed his forehead against it, relishing the shiver the new sensation sent down his spine. His breath fogged the glass.

"Would you like to sit down?" Wonder Woman asked from behind.

Tim ignored her. She wasn't the first to offer. His knees hurt, and the heels of his feet. He knew that in a distant way. He didn't care. He wouldn't move until the glass lifted and let him in. It was his right.

The white curtain beyond was pulled close, likely for another test. Or maybe in a futile attempt to draw him away. They underestimated him. They all underestimated him, even now.

"How much longer." His voice was flat, inflectionless, in the way Bruce's could be. He had learned that in the last half of the year. That and so much more.

"Soon."

Wonder Woman again. He didn't turn.

Soon. A voice echoed in his skull. ***Patience.***

Tim bore it stoically, like he might rain on his face. One look. He'd only gotten one look before the curtain had blocked his view. It hadn't been enough to steady the floating sensation in his stomach. The aches in his body were detached from him, belonging to another body entirely. He couldn't feel his feet on the floor or his hand against the glass, or now even his forehead pressed to the same pane. He felt the same as if they had opened the Watchtower hatch and set him free in the vast black of space—freezing, numb, and devoid of all connection.

A leg pushed through the glass to Tim's left as seamlessly as if stepping through a smooth cascade of water. The rest of the body followed until the Martian Manhunter stood looking down at him. Tim kept his eyes on the fogged view of the curtain.

"Decontamination is almost complete." J'onn's voice resonated in Tim's ears and brain at the same time, tickling the way teeth did when you hummed at just the right pitch. Tim hated it, but he bore it the same way he bore everything now.

"I want time with him." Tim lifted his head from the glass and looked to the alien beside him.

"Of course."

"Just me," Tim clarified. "Before you tell the others."

J'onn's head tilted a fraction, as if thinking, or listening.

Tim's lips tightened. "Tell Superman," there was venom there, a reminder and a threat, "that I've earned it. I get time before the hordes descend."

A pause. Then a slow dip of the head.

"Follow me."

Martian Manhunter walked to the far end of the glass, then stopped when Tim had not moved from his post at the glass.

The entrance is this way.

Tim followed.

At the far end of the glass was a door. On the other side of the door was a hallway, narrow, gleaming, and grey. Other doors led to other rooms, but the door three spots down was where J'onn stopped.

“Wait here.”

And then Tim was alone in the hallway. Who knew how long they would make him wait. “Soon” was a meaningless word, even more so when stacked against six months of waiting. Maybe they would make him wait hours. Maybe they had brought him here so he couldn’t see inside, so they could clear the room through another door and leave him with empty hands. He wouldn’t think it of them normally, but… but…

But what was normal anymore?

A sick thrill shot through him, starting deep in his gut and sparking like live wire through his stomach and up into his dead-beating heart. It was startling for its existence, much less its intensity. When was the last time he had *felt* something?

Tim shivered again, this time from the feeling. Nerves. He was nervous. He had focused on nothing but the end for months, and now that it was here, he—

The door opened. Superman filled the frame, a wall of blue and red. His eyes were soft. Tim used to think them kind, but now he just saw pity and a touch of wariness. The wariness felt good. The pity did not.

Tim waited, close-lipped. He would not jitter, no matter how badly he wanted to see into the room beyond. Nor would he be the first to speak.

The alien broke first.

“Tim—”

“Are you going to let me in or what?”

An apology, a lecture, instructions—whatever was supposed to come next, Tim didn’t want it. Superman blinked at him. Tim stared back. Kon would’ve been impressed, probably, and pleased that the hero worship had finally worn off. If he’d still been in touch with Kon, anyways

“He’s exhausted,” was all Superman said as he stepped to the side. “Go easy.”

Tim had already stopped listening. He pushed his way into the room, dead heart restarting into a stuttering, epiliptic beat. He could feel

sweat blossoming behind his ears. He was coming to life again, like a toy rewound, but it still didn't feel real.
He was struck with a sudden fear, fierce and fluorescent in intensity, that none of this *was* real. That he was still falling, but the ground was coming quickly. His feet carried him toward the center of the room, smooth as a conveyor belt. The bed sat in the middle, bracketed by monitors and machines that whooshed and beeped softly, and one lone chair.

Tim stopped three yards from the bed and couldn't make himself move forward.

Not real, not real, not real.

The figure in the bed, black now faded grey against white sheets, stirred.

If he closed his eyes, it would all disappear. But god, he was so tired.

A rasp, not quite a name. Fingers flexing on the rail. It was enough.

"*Bruce.*"

Tim surged forward, stumbling over his own feet like the clumsy kid he used to be, all knobby knees and untied laces. He caught himself on the bedrail, then wrapped his hands around the fingers that reached toward him.

"You're alive. You're *alive.* I knew it. I knew you were."

That was what he said, or tried to say. The words got a little lost against the boulder in his throat.

Go easy, Superman had warned, and Tim had ignored him, but he was trying, because otherwise he would squeeze Bruce's hand until it broke.

Tim had heard the phrase "like a shadow of himself" before, but now he understood. Bruce's hair had grown longer than Alfred would have ever allowed, waving with silver crests across sunken temples. Tim could see Bruce's skull beneath his skin, all sunken flesh and cracked lips. He looked like he hadn't slept in days, hadn't properly eaten in weeks. Tim could see nicks and burns across his skin, inflicted and already on their way to healing, while graver injuries hid beneath broad swaths of sterile bandages.

He looked awful. He looked wonderful.

“Tim.”

It was barely a whisper, but it brought tears to Tim’s eyes. He bent his head and pressed his lips to Bruce’s knuckles.

Not real, not real, not real.

Shut up. If this wasn’t real, it didn’t matter. He would take it regardless.

“I knew you weren’t dead,” Tim mumbled again.

“Tried to get back.” Bruce shifted in the bed, weakly, as if trying to pull himself together. His voice was low like a bucket of gravel, like a bear’s growl. “Clark said you found me.”

“I’m sorry it took so long. I never stopped looking.” He’d been fooled at first, like the rest of them, but once he started, he had never stopped.

Bruce’s hand turned in Tim’s and cupped the side of his face, calloused thumb stroking gently. Tim squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to cry harder than he already was.

“Sweetheart,” Bruce rumbled, “come here.”

They had never been an overtly affectionate family. Tim had grown up in a sterile, distant home, and Bruce’s chosen gestures came as quiet praise, not physical touch. But Tim didn’t hesitate over Bruce’s command. Minding the lines and leads, he climbed over the bedrail and onto the mattress and squirmed down against Bruce’s side.

This was… He had come to Bruce a boy grown, or that’s how he had felt. Thirteen was too old for crawling into bed after a nightmare, or cuddling up to watch a movie, or riding tall on shoulders in a teeming crowd. They had never done anything like *this* before, but somehow it felt as natural as breathing.

Tim wrapped his arms around Bruce—too easily, Bruce still broad but whittled by the time away—and buried his nose in his Bruce’s chest. He smelled of the tang of space, and of other things Tim couldn’t place, but it was still Bruce. An arm wrapped across his back, heavy in its bonelessness, then tightening across his spine in a clinging hug.

“I have questions,” Bruce said slowly. His chest hummed beneath Tim’s head, like the purr of a big cat. “But I think I… I need to rest.”

That was fine. Bruce had to be shattered, and he would need his strength when the others appeared. This was enough—getting to see him, getting to touch him and know he was *real* and not stoppered in an alabaster jar of dust. Tim hugged Bruce a moment longer, then pulled back to push himself up.

Bruce’s arm tightened, muscles banding across Tim’s back. “Stay?”

So Tim stayed.

Chapter End Notes

Alternate title: Heck It All.

Because my brain is ANGRY and I can't figure out where the rest of this is. There IS MORE COMING, but the world is fighting me. I would recommend keeping an eye out, because I don't know if the next section is a chapter or a related fic, so just bear with me.

In the meantime, you can have this piece, because I need the dopamine and y'all need the knuckle kisses. (Okay, I *also* need the knuckle kisses.)

ETA: The spiritual predecessor to this work can be found here: https://archiveofourown.org/works/22206673

Chapter 2: Bruce

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce woke to a dry mouth. The inside of his lips stuck to his teeth and his tongue clung to his upper palate. He frowned, wondering why that was the first thing he noticed. Then he realized the fear was gone, that rabbit's foot rat-a-tat-tatting of not knowing where he was or what he would open his eyes to see. That fear had plagued him for an eternity, though eons and ages, across space and time, precisely because he *was* moving across space and time.

But not now. Not here, despite not knowing where here was.

The air smelled of… space, that gunpowder flash. Or maybe real gunpowder. That was possible, too. There was a thin pillow beneath his head, and a mattress beneath his back. A real mattress, by the feel of it. And something heavy across his chest.

Bruce opened one eye, and then the other. His vision was eclipsed by a dark head of hair.

That one's mine. The answer pinged deep in his chest. That was one of his, one of his boys.

I made it. I'm home.

He blinked up at the ceiling he now recognized as the Watchtower's sickbay, content to count rivets as his eyes ran clean of sleep.

Once his tears had dried sticky on his cheeks, Bruce sniffed once and lowered his chin. Tim. He recognized the head now, or always had but could at last put a name to it beyond a feeling.

Bruce bent his neck, grimacing only slightly at the strain, and pressed his lips to Tim's scalp. His boy's hair smelled like artificial wildflowers, but his skin was warm and the strands were soft.

Tim shifted, curling sleepily into the touch. Bruce smiled, an unfamiliar expression that made his mouth feel rusty at the hinges. He wasn't sure where the rest of the family was but assumed they would be in soon. Until then, he was content where he was.

Another subtle movement, this time longer with muscles trembling into the stretch. Then blue eyes lifted to meet Bruce's. They were red-rimmed. He remembered, distantly, Tim crying by his bed.

"You're real." Tim's voice was low with sleep and whisper soft.

Bruce brushed back strands out of Tim's face to see him better. He had missed this face. It had kept him going, this face and the others.

"I think so." He had been lost in time and then to time. He hadn't felt wholly real in quite a while. "How long was I gone?"

Clark had told him the year, the same he had left, but Bruce wanted to hear it again. Independent confirmation was important.

"Six months and fourteen days." Tim's answer was immediate.

Six months. Less than it had seemed, but still a stinging slap in the face. Over half a year away.

Bruce sucked in a slow breath through his nose, then grimaced at the twinge it sent through cartilage not quite healed.

"Long time."

"Yeah," Tim whispered.

Bruce took a closer look at him now, with the absence in mind. He didn't think it was a trick of the eye that Tim seemed older, with a portion of his boyish softness sloughed away. He was lean, almost bordering on haggard, with a thin but deep crease between his brows that didn't fade even as Bruce rubbed his thumb against it. Bruce's thumb worried the furrow a moment more, then tapped against the pink slash of healing skin next to Tim's right eye.

"This is new." A slight hesitation, a question without enough of an uptick to be a question.

Tim had closed his eyes again, content as a cat in the sun. "Yes."

Bruce ghosted a fingertip over the bridge of his nose, tracing the unexpected shape. "Did you break this recently?"

"Mm."

"I thought I taught you how to duck."

“S’fine. We match.”

It wasn’t like Tim to be sloppy. All of his kids could take a punch. That was the nature of their job, their life, but Tim was cerebral in his fights, and tenacious. It must have been quite an opponent to catch him square across the face like that.

Bruce dragged his hand up Tim’s face and into his hair, pushing it back and combing through the strands. “You need a haircut.”

“Br*uce*,” Tim huffed, but his lips twitched fondly. “Please. Already? You just got back.”

“Because of you.” He remembered that, Clark saying that Tim was the one who had refused to believe he was dead and had found him in the end.

Dead. Gone and buried for six months. Bruce could only imagine what that must have been like for his family. They all had already suffered so much loss.

“Is… How is… everyone?”

Booster hadn’t said when he first appeared. Bruce thought he remembered asking the others as they gathered him up onto the bed, but he couldn’t remember the answer. Had he forgotten because all was well? Or because nothing was?

Bruce’s hand stilled in Tim’s hair.

“Fine,” Tim said, stumbling into the delay. “Everyone’s fine.”

There was a feeling in the back of Bruce’s brain, a suspicion, like a snake uncurling to flick its tongue out, to test the air. There was something Tim wasn’t telling him, something wrong.

But then Tim repeated the reassurance and began to pull away, and Bruce was… afraid. Afraid to know, and to lose his moment of peace before knowing. And whatever it was, he had to trust Tim not to lie to him. He had to believe that everyone was fine.

“Okay,” Bruce murmured and let his head fall back against the pillow.

“Really,” Tim repeated, tone steadier this time. “Everyone’s fine. I mean. Considering we thought…”

That he was dead. Bruce pressed his lips to Tim’s hair again and

enjoyed the pleased confusion of his boy's answering hum.

"I'm sorry I put you all through that," he murmured, word muffled by hair and scalp.

"Not your fault." Tim was sinking into him again, wary muscles slowly relaxing into limp contentment.

They had never done this before. Why had they never done this before? Dick used to laze with him on the couch all the time, flopping dramatically over Bruce's legs while puzzling out homework or curled pressed to Bruce's side while Bruce read to him. And sometimes they would recline together, just like this, doing nothing at all. Jason less so, but Jason had been older, more independent, and even he had loafed about with Bruce from time to time. And Cass, Cass was a little burr.

Never Tim, though. A mistake on Bruce's part. One he now had a chance to rectify, along with a million other little things he thought he would never be able to do again.

If he couldn't press more about the family, he could ask in other ways. "Tell me what I've missed?"

It took time. Bruce was still gathering strength, having drained himself dry in his fight to return. He found himself nodding off, drifting only to return with a sharp jerk of his neck. Tim waited patiently for him every time, either still pressed against his chest or curled by his side. Tim himself wasn't moving quickly either. He picked his way slowly through the past six months, crafting a narrative of his search for Bruce. It was a landscape in lace, beautiful but full of holes. Bruce tracked the mentions of the others—too few, far too few—enough to know they were indeed alive. And he listened to Tim step around gaping sinkholes in his narrative enough to wager that some of the omissions were because of modesty, but the rest was… what? It felt almost defensive, though of himself or of Bruce or of others, Bruce couldn't be sure. He wouldn't be sure until he was home again.

Bruce tousled Tim's hair fondly and pressed one more quick kiss to his forehead, a self-indulgence after an eon of deprivation, then called to the ceiling, "Clark?"

A soft click from the overhead speaker, breaking the charade of privacy.

"Bring me some clothes."

It had been more of a fight than he expected—not from Clark, but from Tim. Clark's protests Bruce had expected. The Kent line mother-henned well, and Clark's own invulnerabilities meant he tended to treat his unpowered friends—Bruce in particular—with the care of finely spun glass when he was reminded of their shortcomings. As impatient as Bruce was, he knew his absence hadn't been tough for his family alone.

Tim though, Tim was the insistent one. Tim was the one who fretted over his readouts, who tried to keep his clothes away, who fussed and stewed and hovered. This wasn't completely new. In their beginnings, when Bruce had dropped into the deep pit of his own sorrows and Tim had been the rope to pull him out, their relationship had been inverted much like this.

Bruce let Tim fuss silently and with more than a little gruff fondness, but he still dressed himself and carefully picked the leads off his chest and pulled the lines from his veins. At last, he rested a hand on his son's shoulder, cutting off the latest protest.

"Come on," Bruce murmured. "Let's go home."

He expected Tim to soften, perhaps even lean against him a little. Each of his children were cyphers in their own way, with intricacies and enigmatic responses that continually caught him off guard, but they had their own well-worn paths as well. Tim's secret was that he loved hearing the Manor referred to as *home*.

But instead of the warmth Bruce expected, a strange look crossed Tim's face, a broad and conflicting mess of emotions flashing like bird wings startled from the brush. Bruce couldn't parse what he saw, each furrow and dip and flicker a notation in a language he didn't know how to read. All he knew was that when Tim smiled, it didn't reach his eyes.

"Yeah," Tim said quietly, "home."

They left the medbay and joined the rest of the Watchtower at the zeta. The crowd that had greeted Bruce when he and Booster first arrived had thinned in the waning hours, so it was only Clark and Diana that stood guard. Bruce kept a hand on Tim's shoulder, for balance and reassurance, and could feel his son straighten under the regard of the others.

"Bruce, are you sure you should leave so quickly?" Diana asked.

"I'll rest better at home," Bruce replied. Now that he was upright, he could feel his heart straining like a dog on a leash. He was in the right time at last, but still in the wrong place.

"You need monitoring," Clark began, but Bruce cut him off.

"I need to see my family." He didn't know why they weren't here. Protocol, perhaps, the need to keep the Watchtower a place for defense instead of reunions. Alfred would never travel via zeta, anyways, so maybe the others waited on his behalf, knowing Bruce wouldn't stay away any longer than he must.

Clark's jaw flexed unhappily, but he nodded. He, more than anyone else in the League with the exception of J'onn, knew what being separated from his kids did to Bruce.

"We'll need to work on your report once you're feeling better," Clark said instead, voice soft but insistent. "I'll coordinate with Alfred next week."

The last thing on Bruce's mind now was a report, but he wrote the protocol that demanded it, so he could hardly protest now. Besides, it would do Clark good to check in, and that wasn't something he wished to fight either.

Bruce nodded and reached with his free hand. Diana covered his hand with both of hers, while Clark ignored the handshake and instead ducked under Bruce's other side to help him to the zeta.

Tim shied away, pulling Bruce with him. "I've got him."

There was an exchange Bruce couldn't quite catch, a flashing of eyes and thinning of lips, but Clark was the one to concede as Tim's arm tightened around Bruce's waist. Clark stepped back, but not before giving Bruce another quick hug. Bruce doubted the report would wait the full week.

“Thank you,” Bruce told them as Tim walked him to the tube. “And thank Booster as well.”

Bruce’s heart thundered with anticipation as he stepped into the narrow tube. Home, home, home, soon he would be home. His last sight was of Tim watching him from the other side of the glass.

Chapter End Notes

I don't want to make promises I can't keep, so I'm not going to update the chapter count to a ?. Just know I'm still working, and we'll see what comes. The tentative goal is a chapter a week until we hit the end. Whatever that end is. But each will be structured like these two, where each end can be The End in case I need to stop.

Chapter 3: Bruce, continued

Chapter Summary

> *He was doing this. He was walking in his own home again, in his own time. There was no need to run. No need to hide. He wasn't going to be hunted or ripped away or thrown headlong into oblivion. It was real and Bruce forced himself to focus on the way the wallpaper felt beneath his fingertips and the hardwood beneath his socked feet to chase away the disbelieving numbness.*

Chapter Notes

> I upset myself a bit in part of this. Just FYI.
>
> Also, my current thesis statement is Bruce calls his children "sweetheart" *and* sometimes "love" because that's what his parents and Alfred used, respectively.

The sensation of the zeta was too familiar, too similar to the delayed echo-snap of time travel. Every time Bruce was flung through time, he felt the disassociation of his consciousness and body separating, stretching, duplicating like ripples in fog. He had grown sick on it, miserable and depleted with each new ricochet through time.

The trip from the Watchtower to the Cave was nearly instantaneous, no more than a blink. Bruce had to remain in the zeta-tube for a moment longer, drawing in long, slow breaths through his nose to convince his head and heart of what he would open his eyes to see. Not a strange land. Not a lost time. Home.

One more breath.

Bruce opened his eyes, and there it was.

Bruce stepped out into the dry chill of the Cave. It smelled the same—concrete and guano and industrial cleaner and tire rubber—and sounded the same with the distant squeak of bats and the hum of machinery. Above him, a red light flashed silently, sending an alert up into the house.

The door at the top of the stairs was flung open and banged against the wall. Bruce and his eldest stared at each other from their respective distances, and then the distance dropped to a matter of feet

in seconds as Dick cleared the stairs and stood before him, blue eyes blown wide.

He looked like he had seen a ghost, which, Bruce supposed, was somewhat accurate.

“When I was seven and came here, my first pair of pajamas that you bought me, what was on them?” Dick asked, breathless and intense.

Bruce frowned, thrown by the unorthodox greeting and by the need to fumble blindly back into his own dim memories.

“You were eight,” he corrected slowly, “and Alfred bought them. They were solid blue. You pretended to like them. You liked the next pair, with elephants, better.”

Bruce grunted as Dick launched himself forward with the same determined abandon of his childhood, their bodies colliding together. Bruce had to stagger back a step to regain his balance, but their arms were already wrapping around each other. This was the hug Bruce knew well, knew best. He closed his eyes and breathed.

“Sorry,” Dick rasped, face half-buried in Bruce’s shoulder. “We’ve had some security issues. I had to be sure.”

Bruce didn’t know what that meant. Six months away, he was sure there was a lot he didn’t know. It didn’t matter right now. He cupped the back of his son’s head and held him tightly before planting a kiss to Dick’s temple.

Dick had been just a little boy with wide, cornflower eyes and a powder-keg temper when he first came to the Manor. Bruce could still remember his exact height, curly head barely reaching Bruce’s waist. Now he was so grown, a man with a big heart to match, but still too young to lose another father.

“I’m sorry I was away for so long,” Bruce murmured.

Dick held him and let himself be held for a moment longer, then pulled back with a wet sniff. “Not your fault. I’m glad you’re back.”

Behind Dick, hovering out of reach with arms crossed, stood another little boy, but his hair was thick and wavy instead of gently curled, and his eyes were green. Bruce realized with a guilty twist in his stomach that he hadn’t given much thought to his youngest in his time away.

He hadn't *forgotten* Damian, of course not. But they had been new to each other when Bruce went away, new and wary of what the other meant, despite being linked by blood. Bruce had yet to accustom himself to having this child in his world, much less be able to contemplate what that child's world would be like without Bruce in it.

"Father," Damian greeted with a slight lift of his chin. "You look horrible."

Dick snorted, one arm still looped comfortably around Bruce's waist.

"But it is well you have returned," Damian finished, stiffness turning in the light to limn brittle.

"Thank you." Bruce kept his voice deep and solemn, guessing—correctly, he hoped—that the strange little boy before him might appreciate the esteem more than the affection. Neither moved to hug the other.

Bruce kept his arm around Dick's shoulder, both for the proximity and to keep himself upright as he looked past Damian.

"Alfred is waiting for you upstairs," Dick explained, apologetic for the reduced greeting.

That didn't surprise Bruce, nor did the lack of a third, broad-shouldered boy. Some part of him had secretly hoped Jason might come, but even that quiet part had known it was an empty hope. He would have to seek out his son later, on his own and in his own time. But Jason wasn't the only missing greeting.

"Cassandra?" Bruce asked as he searched the empty space for a slender girl with soft, dancing eyes. Where was his daughter?

"She, uh, left."

"Left?" Bruce echoed dumbly. His arm dropped from Dick's shoulder. His eldest wouldn't meet his gaze.

"Before the… before the service," Dick explained, carefully sidestepping *funeral*.

Six months ago. *And you let her go?*

Some of Bruce's horror must have shown on his face, because Dick's jaw tightened and he added, "We tracked her down, B. She was clear.

She didn't want to come back. Not without you here."

Why? Why would she leave? This was her home. Bruce had been clear, this was her *home*, her family. Cassandra had spent too much of her life alone. She should have been here, with her family, even if that meant without Bruce. Especially if it meant without Bruce.

She would come back. He was back, so she would come back, and he would talk to her and they would fix whatever made her leave in the first place. Bruce forced himself to breathe, aware of both Dick and Damian watching him closely. He nodded, and even managed to relax his shoulders.

"I'm sorry," Bruce said again, echoing his earlier words. "I can't imagine the last six months have been easy for any of you."

He was standing in reserves, propped upright by sheer stubbornness of will. Zetas turned him inside out even on good days. The bed in the Watchtower seemed like a lifetime ago. He didn't wobble, but Dick seemed to know, as he always did, and slipped a steadying arm around Bruce's waist.

"It's not your fault. You didn't leave. You were taken. And you're back now." Dick's arm tightened, and he didn't seem inclined to let go any time soon. Bruce wouldn't have let him, even if he were. "Come on. Let's get you upstairs."

Bruce went under his own power, slowly, but able to pretend that his arm draped around Dick's shoulders was for companionship alone. Maybe it was. Dick had gotten broader in the last six months. Not noticeably so—Dick was still trim like a swimmer, like his own parents—but the bulk was new enough that Bruce noticed the definition. There was more for him to notice in all of them, he was sure, but Bruce chose not to look yet.

The Cave was his home, and stepping into it had been important, a press against the door of the last six months, but stepping through the clock to the study was something else entirely. There were no changes —not no changes that he could tell, but no changes at all. It was as if he had never left, and the solidness of it felt like an embrace. This was his father's desk, his desk, in his study, in his home.

He was home.

Bruce was struck with the urge to tour the entire house, to lay his hands on every inch of this place he had learned to love and hate and

love and hate. Ghosts lived here, but memories too, and he was relieved to find himself among the latter.

But the tour, he realized abruptly, would have to wait. Dick guided him to the study sofa before his creaking knees could give way completely.

“Why don’t you rest here for a bit?” Dick offered, one hand still on Bruce’s back.

“I’m—”

“Clark said not to let you push too hard,” Dick continued, then added, “and it’ll give us time to get everything straightened.”

The former wasn’t a persuasive argument, but the latter was enough of an excuse for Bruce to nod and slump back against the cushions. What needed to be straightened or why it wasn’t straightened in the hours since he had returned didn’t seem important enough to be asked. Sitting felt better than it should have.

Dick ducked forward and kissed Bruce’s forehead, Damian gave him a nod, and then the study was empty except for the soft ticking of the clock on the desk.

Bruce didn’t remember slumping down. Didn’t remember falling asleep at all, until suddenly he was awake again and staring at the faded Bugs Bunny sticker affixed to the side of the desk. It would have been out of sight to anyone standing in the room, tucked beneath the lip of the edge and visible only to someone very small or crouched very low. Bruce couldn’t remember having noticed it before, though it likely had been there for decades, as much of a fixture in the room as the desk or the grandfather clock. A mark of Dick’s presence, he decided, from that narrow but vividly awful window of time when the boy had been obsessed with cartoons and mimicking the laugh of one Woodrow Woodpecker.

He stared at that sticker for a time, too hazy to consider getting up just yet. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed—if Dick and Damian had just left or had been gone for hours or were already back. But there was an ache in his bones that was growing, far deeper and more persistent that arthritis or bruised muscles. He needed to tend to it, and waiting was not an option.

Bruce grunted as he sat up, then again as he pushed himself to his feet. He was pleased to find he was steadier than before. The hand he

kept against the wallpapered hallway felt more like a caress hello to a home well-missed than a necessity.

He was doing this. He was walking in his own home again, in his own time. There was no need to run. No need to hide. He wasn't going to be hunted or ripped away or thrown headlong into oblivion. It was real and Bruce forced himself to focus on the way the wallpaper felt beneath his fingertips and the hardwood beneath his socked feet to chase away the disbelieving numbness.

Bruce followed the hall through the house. He didn't know how he knew where to go. Instinct, perhaps. But he didn't falter as his feet led him through the Manor to the kitchen.

Alfred stood at the sink, cuffs rolled to his elbows and arms plunged into sudsy water. He was, Bruce suspected, deep in thought, since Alfred was not humming beneath breath as he worked, and the motions as he scrubbed at the dish in his hand were a little too forceful.

Bruce should go to him, right now, and hug him from behind like a gangly teen coming home for Thanksgiving. But he found he couldn't move. Instead, Bruce leaned against the doorframe and watched. From behind, this could be the Alfred of a year past, or a decade. It was the same gently silvered hair, the same sloping shoulders, the same button-up dress shirt tucked into belted and pressed trousers.

Bruce knew, cognitively, that Alfred changed with the rest of them. The few photos the butler had allowed himself to be captured in through the years confirmed it, as did the rare moments when Bruce allowed himself to notice the thickening silver, the deepening wrinkles, the darkening liver spots. Every time, his heart caught in his chest. Except for those moments, Alfred remained the same, yesterday, today, and forever. But still Bruce could not step forward.

Shy, Bruce realized after a moment of hesitant introspection. He felt shy. Not anxious or apprehensive, but… bashful. It was an unusual feeling, but not unfamiliar. He had hovered much in the same way after returning to Gotham the first time, wary and unsure of his welcome after disappearing for several years with little warning. The difference then was, despite his reticence, Bruce had been a young man still wrapped in the benevolent selfishness of youth. He had feared Alfred's reaction without thinking too closely about the *why* of it.

Now Bruce was a man full-grown, and a father himself. He knew how it felt to bury a child.

“If you are going to hover like a hobgoblin, the least you could do is start drying.” Alfred’s voice was clear and crisp, not raised or heated, but enunciated clearly to carry even with his back turned.

Bruce was aware that he was shuffling forward like a little boy, and not even his lingering weakness could be fully blamed. He plucked the towel from the oven drawer and fought not to wring it in nervous hands as he lined up at the counter.

The kitchen was quiet. Bruce could hear the hum of the fridge and the slosh of the dishwater and the far-off chirps of birds in the yard. Alfred said nothing more, so neither did he. A plate passed between them, from hand to hand with no contact between, and then a saucer, a cup, another plate.

When Alfred finally spoke, his words were a mere murmur, as if he were completely alone in the room. “When you were a boy, you used to hide pennies about the house, do you remember? I would find them in the strangest places. I thought it was a sly joke of yours, a way to make sure I was cleaning properly or some such thing.”

Bruce did remember that. The motivations were foggy, as many things were from that age. He had been so lost then, aware of settling into a new normal without his parents but unable to properly comprehend what that normal would be. His world had shrunk to Alfred and to his grief. Even now, they were his two constants. But, if he crouched down and folded himself into that young, clouded mind, Bruce thought he recollected the small, gleaming joy of saying hello by hiding a penny for Pennyworth.

“I still found them years later,” Alfred was saying. “When you were away, off overseas, I would find a penny and tell myself it meant you were thinking of me, wherever you were.”

He huffed, as if embarrassed of his own sentimentality. Bruce’s throat felt curiously tight.

“We placed a stone off the garden path, next to your parents’. Unmarked, in case of visitors.” Alfred had stopped washing, his gaze on the murky water as he gripped the counter’s edge. “I thought it might be a comfort to… to have you near. I would walk out to it whenever I found a penny.”

Alfred turned to Bruce then. It was the first time Bruce had seen his face in six months and fourteen days.

“I buried you.” Alfred’s face was a worn map of cares, aggrieved and familiar. Bruce had known every line before he left. There were new ones now. “I took what was left of you, I washed you, I clothed you, I held you, and I buried you.”

“I know,” Bruce whispered. And he did. More than anyone else could, he *knew*.

There was a moment, suspended crystalline in the air, where they stared at each other, and there was a chance that they might turn back to their chore. That was their relationship, after all—rife with things never said, that may never *need* to be said. Then the moment shattered against the certainty that, of those many things that might remain safely unacknowledged, this was not one.

Bruce reached for the man who raised him even as his own expression wobbled and broke.

“I’m sorry, Alf,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

He could feel Alfred trembling in his arms, the old butler’s hand quivering as it cupped the back of his head. Bruce felt like a child again, struggling not to hiccup in his caretaker’s arms after some awful nightmare. No, worse, because it was a nightmare they had both suffered.

“I’m okay.” The assurance burst forth in a hushed babble, because Bruce could see the Cave and his body laid out on a slab. He could see Alfred graveside at the funeral, dressed in mourner’s black yet again. He could see it, and he couldn’t shake the images. “I’m okay. I’m here. I’m home. I didn’t die, not even a little. I’m so sorry.”

Alfred shushed him, hand squeezing the back of his neck, so Bruce subsided. They stood together for some time, Bruce bent and huddled into Alfred, Alfred with his head against Bruce’s chest, their arms around each other. Bruce breathed deeply and could feel his heartrate slow a little. He forgot, until he was away, how tied to home the smell of Alfred’s aftershave was.

Neither of them, as far as he was aware, cried, though there was some surreptitious thumbing of the eyes as they separated. Before Bruce could go far, Alfred gave him a tug. Bruce bent obediently, ducking down again so Alfred could press dry, cool lips to his forehead.

“It is good to have you home, love,” Alfred murmured.

“It’s good to *be* home,” Bruce replied, straightening enough to return the gesture.

“We’ll have your favorites tonight,” Alfred decided, then reached up to comb the hair back from Bruce’s forehead. “After you are given a decent cut and shave.”

“*Alfred*,” Bruce fussed fondly, but the mention of a haircut returned him to present concerns. He looked about the empty kitchen. “I dozed by accident in the study. Any idea where the boys are?”

“I believe they are upstairs, airing out your room,” Alfred replied. He reached into the sink and let loose the drain. He was careful not to look at Bruce as he added, “And likely putting fresh linens on the bed. Master Dick has taken to sleeping in your bed.”

On bad nights, he meant. Bruce’s heart ached. Eager for a distraction, he rolled the tension out of his neck. “I didn’t hear Tim come in from downstairs. Is he in his room?”

He couldn’t imagine all three boys working together upstairs. Last he remembered, Damian and Tim had been on uncertain terms. Then again, six months was a long time, and trauma had a way of changing things.

Alfred looked up from the plates he had begun to stack. “You saw Master Timothy?”

Bruce’s brows furrowed. “Yes. He was in the Watchtower when I was brought in. Clark said he found me.”

The lines around Alfred’s mouth deepened as he smiled, but the expression didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I’m glad. That boy was indefatigable in his search for you. He was convinced you were alive.” The smile faded. “I am afraid he was alone in that conviction, and it made for a very solitary experience.”

“No one could have known,” Bruce assured weakly. He blamed none of them, but he couldn’t see how this answered his question. Or he could, if he looked hard enough, but he didn’t want to.

“Perhaps not.” Alfred’s lips pressed together as he weighed his next words, but before he could speak, a call came from down the corridor.

“B?” There was the thunder of pounding feet and then, “Alfred, have you seen—” Dick’s head popped around the corner and caught sight of Bruce. A smile warm as the dawning sun spread across his face. “There you are. We went back for you and you were gone.”

“Your room is just as you left it, Father,” Damian chimed in. He had appeared at Dick’s elbow, arms folded at ease behind his back. Tim was not with them.

There was that feeling again, that bird-wing heart flutter that warned of unspoken changes, of hidden faultlines shifting beneath his feet. Whatever Tim had refused to tell him, it was tangled up in… whatever this was.

I just got home, Bruce thought desperately.

But there was more concern here than just Tim’s absence. It was the worry on Dick’s face when he had rounded the corner, before he had seen that Bruce was present and well. It was the wary distance Damian continued to give him, careful to keep Dick positioned between him and Bruce. It was the tremor in Alfred’s hand and the moisture at the corner of his eyes.

Bruce thought it unfair that he had been nearly drowned in an excess of time, when now there was too little to tend to his family.

Dick was waiting, face bright and expectant, so Bruce followed the boys up the stairs. No one offered to help him, for which he was grateful, but he could feel the heavy thudding of his heart against the muscles of his chest by the time they reached the second floor.

“Everything’s the way you left it,” Dick promised as they stepped into the room, and his promise rang true. Bruce’s room looked as if he had been away this morning. The curtains were pulled back, letting in the late afternoon light, and the carpet smelled freshly washed. The far door to the adjoined bathroom was open. Dick gestured toward it.

“I went ahead and put in fresh towels. I thought you might want to shower.” Dick’s smile was soft and fond, his nose wrinkling. “You still smell like space.”

“A shower would be nice,” Bruce conceded, his mind already navigating three steps ahead.

“After your shower, a shave and a haircut,” Alfred reminded him from just outside the bedroom doorway. “It will do wonders for making you

feel like yourself again."

"Of course."

Still they lingered, pressing upon him a hug (Dick), a squeeze to the shoulder (Alfred), a nod (Damian), and trailing looks as if expecting him to disappear the moment his feet crossed the threshold from carpet to bathroom tile. Bruce shut the door with a fond smile, then waited in the bathroom until he was sure his room was empty.

His phone had been destroyed in the explosion, Bruce was sure. It certainly hadn't fallen through time with him. But a second phone, a burner rarely used, sat in the back of his sock drawer. He pulled it out now and dialed the number from memory.

It rang. And rang. And rang. There was no personalized recording at the end, but when the beep sounded, Bruce spoke.

"Tim? It's me." Worry, repressed in front of the others, now bubbled and burned in his throat. "I..." *Where are you? I thought you were following me back? What aren't you telling me?* "Call me when you get this."

Bruce ended the call with a frustrated jab of his thumb and tossed the phone onto the bathroom counter. He listened for the ring while he showered. It never came.

Chapter 4: Bruce, continued again

Chapter Summary

Moved out.

Bruce stared at the night-black ceiling and jabbed at the words again, like sticking a finger in a wound.

Moved out.

Tim.

Moved out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Moved out.

Bruce stared at the night-black ceiling and jabbed at the words again, like sticking a finger in a wound.

Moved out.

Tim.

Moved out.

There was a bedroom down the hall. Its door was closed. If Bruce got up right now and opened the door, the room would be empty. He had done it already, while Dick and Damian were on patrol. He'd needed to see for himself.

Even at a glance, Bruce had known. Tim was a messy boy. Though

restrained and carefully neat in his own way, he exerted control over his chosen spaces by being completely *un*restrained. His room at the Drakes' had been a pigsty, a state Bruce had unconsciously attributed to neglect and lack of care, especially when contrasted with the pin-straight condition of Tim's new room in the Manor. But the longer Tim stayed, the messier his Manor room became. Bruce couldn't say when he had pieced it together. He just knew that one day, he had started seeing Tim's room through his boy's eyes, and every riotous splash of clothing on the floor, every crumpled piece of paper, every precarious stack of books, every gnarled mess of wires became a declaration.

This space is mine, my own, and I fill it with me.

The room was empty now. The furniture was still there, the bed carefully made, the bookshelf full of books and figurines and disc cases, and framed prints still hung on the walls. It looked like Tim might come back any moment, if Tim were any other boy. But there were no balled socks scattered across the floor, no half-empty mugs cooling on the desk, no backpack with its contents spilling onto the rug.

The room was empty of Tim.

Bruce had sat on the bed and tried to call his son again. And again, Tim didn't pick up.

Home. He had told Tim they were going home. He had meant *their* home, and Tim hadn't said a word. He just… hadn't followed.

And Bruce didn't know *why*. They had told him over dinner, after hours of silent fretting on Bruce's part, as if Alfred's rules of civility might protect them all and keep him calm. And perhaps there was some magic in that still, because Bruce could only listen in stunned silence to the piecemeal explanation.

A fight, Dick had said. A disagreement over decisions made, heightened tempers, emotions still frayed raw from mourning. There was more. Bruce knew there was more. He was presumed-dead-actually-alive, not actually dead. His perceptive skills weren't gone. Which also meant he noticed the dark shadows under Dick's eyes and the pensive crease in his brow. He noticed the intense stillness with which Damian listened, for once not daring to interject his opinion. He noticed how Alfred didn't remain in the room.

There was more, but the last six months was a minefield, and Bruce

didn't know where he dared to step.

So here he was. Alive. Home. And unable to sleep.

Bruce hadn't fought to join patrol tonight. He was stubborn, not stupid. Six months away would mean changes for Gotham as well, changes he would need to learn before he shadowed her streets again. Besides, his body still felt fragile, like a step ready to fracture under too much weight.

The boys were home. Bruce heard them come up the stairs not too long ago and whisper their goodnights to each other. That eased some of the static in his bones, but not all. He didn't know what bruises they bore, what dangers they had risked to protect their city. That they were alive would have to be enough.

It was not enough that they were only two.

Bruce considered his silent phone again, then rejected the impulse to pluck it from his bedside stand. He had left too many messages already. One more would not tip the balance in his favor.

The house was quiet now, not just hushed but truly still. The downstairs computers were asleep, the comms muted, the streets emptied. Alfred would be abed, perhaps only just awake as he read a chapter by lamplight, but soon ready to roll over and slumber. The boys, having showered downstairs, would be asleep as soon as they hit their mattresses. Patrol, even on a slow night, was exhausting.

He was exhausted. But still he couldn't sleep.

Bruce didn't know how long he stared up at his ceiling, still frustrated he was awake, still awed he was here at all, when the doorway filled with shadow. He had left the door agape just a crack, long habit from years of parenthood. A closed door meant *do not disturb*, but some nights were too harrowing to face alone. But it had been a long time since anyone had darkened his doorway.

He propped himself up on one elbow, squinting at the familiar silhouette. "Dick? Everything okay?"

"Yeah," came the whispered response. "Sorry, B. Go back to sleep."

"Wasn't sleeping." Bruce grunted as he sat up more fully. His shoulders had stiffened during his crash-nap in the study, and they complained now as he tried to catch a look at his son's face. "It's the

bed, I think."

The shadow pushed open the door a little. "What about the bed?"

"Too soft," Bruce admitted. "I had the same problem after coming back from abroad."

Abroad meaning his travels to "find himself" that had led to him becoming the person who would become Batman. Bruce had spent that time backpacking around the world, which meant many nights spent on benches or caves or forest floors. Much like his time spent hurtling through the eras, now that he thought about it. No wonder his mattress felt wrong.

"It feels… strange, being back." Bruce hadn't meant to confess that, but it now hung in the dark, glinting like a lure for the figure in the doorway.

"Does it?" Dick asked.

"A little." Bruce leaned back against the headboard and sighed again.

"Would you like to talk about it?" Dick offered as he came a half-step closer.

"Would you like to sit down?" Bruce offered in return.

When he was a boy, after a nightmare, Dick would run to Bruce's room and throw himself on the bed. Bruce had caught many an errant elbow or knee to the side in those days, but he hadn't minded. And then there were the mornings when, after a peaceful night apart, Dick would come shuffling in, fist crammed into one sleepy eye, and haul himself up onto the bed to curl up next to Bruce, content as a cat in the sunbeam. Both behaviors had tapered off dramatically in Dick's adolescence without disappearing entirely. But it had been years since Dick had lived in the Manor.

There was no catapulting this time, nor a sleepy shuffle. Dick's feet were silent as he crossed the rug, but Bruce could see the outline of his bowed shoulders even in the moonlit dim. The edge of the mattress dipped under Dick's weight, and then he swung his legs up to sit against the headboard, parallel with Bruce.

That was a man's profile in his periphery. Bruce didn't think he would ever grow accustomed to it. He always expected to turn and see a little boy, his boy, with wild hair and a cheeky grin.

“What was it like?” Dick asked into the dark. He wasn’t looking at Bruce. It was easier for Bruce to talk to Dick openly than any of his other children (with Cass he didn’t need to talk at all), but that was partly because Dick knew the cheats. Dick knew how to let Bruce breathe, to let him duck away from the weight of an unblinking focus.

“What?” Bruce asked. He knew.

“Being… gone.”

Bruce took a breath. Someone like Clark could have found the right word—right words, even, to encapsulate the experience, to make it ring true. To take all the fear and pain and exhaustion and despair and make it seem like a victory. Bruce could barely even think about it at all. Time had collapsed around him, experiences like a smeared, psychedelic whirlpool. Gazing into it again made him nauseated.

But Dick was waiting, and the longer the silence pooled, the deeper it felt.

“Lonely,” Bruce said at last, and was surprised to feel the word ring full and clear in his chest. It was the right word, or a right word, at least. “It was lonely.”

Being alone, in danger, and on the run was infinitely worse knowing that his family was waiting. Knowing that he might not ever make it back to them. It wasn’t dying that had frightened him. Bruce had spent his whole life preparing to die. No, he had been terrified of letting his family down, of leaving them to face the world alone.

Dick made a noise deep in his throat like a scoff, but when Bruce turned to look at him, his face was in his hands.

“Chum?” Bruce’s fingertips were on Dick’s wrist. “Dick, sweetheart. Talk to me.”

Dick sucked in a ragged breath but did not drop his hands, choosing instead to speak muffled through pressed palms. “I thought you were gone. I watched you *die*.”

Bruce knew this, but hearing it aloud felt like a mule-kick to the chest. His disappearance had been a strangely silent affair, snatched away as he had been a blink before the explosion. But now, with his son by his side, he could imagine hearing Dick scream as he had ringside all those years ago.

“I thought…” Dick audibly swallowed. “And then it was just me. Damian and planning the funeral and the cowl and WE and my job and… and I couldn’t…”

Bruce waited, breath caught in his chest, wrapped like tissue paper around his breaking heart.

“I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I was handling it. I *had* to handle it, because it was just me. I thought you were dead, Bruce.” Dick dropped his hands and looked at him then, face stricken but strangely dry.

“I know,” Bruce murmured. “I’m sorry.”

His poor boy. To lose a second father, Bruce couldn’t even imagine. Dick had already borne too much loss in his young life. And to manage that grief while bearing the weight of the cowl, of the family…

But Dick was shaking his head, teeth gritted. “No, you don’t understand. I thought you were *dead*. We buried you. I-I, I tried to mourn you and… move on. We all did. I encouraged it. But we *left* you.”

Yes. They had. But Bruce felt no hurt for that. They couldn’t have known.

“I’m back now,” was all Bruce said, words resting like a cupped palm atop Dick’s head.

“We were going to box up your stuff this weekend.” The confession was explosive, deafening like a sonic pulse in the silence of the dark room. “I didn’t tell anyone, but I’d already gotten the boxes. I only waited this long because of Alfred and because I…” A hushed sigh. “It was too final, even for me, but I didn’t want… I wanted to handle things differently.”

Differently than Bruce had. With his own parents. With Jason. With those frozen, silent shrines.

“What kind of partner does that?” Dick asked, taking Bruce’s silence as condemnation, or too lost in the roar of his own guilt to notice at all. “What kind of son?”

That, Bruce decided, was enough. He reached, wrapping an arm around Dick and pulling him close. Dick went without a fight but

remained tense against Bruce's chest.

"One who made the best decisions he could based on available facts," Bruce murmured. He didn't expect Dick to make the same choices he had. Though they could work in silent synchronicity, coordinating and communicating with no words at all, they had disagreed just as much, often loudly. Dick was his own person, a fact Bruce had, with much stumbling, come to accept.

Bruce bent his neck to rest his cheek atop Dick's scalp and added, "My way didn't exactly make me the paragon of mental health."

Dick snorted, then sighed, and Bruce sighed with him. They sat there, breathing together in the dark.

"This doesn't feel real," Dick confessed, breaking their silence abruptly. "Like, I'm awake, and I know you're here, but…"

"But it feels like the kind of real from a dream, like sensations are pins and needles in your fingertips," Bruce finished quietly. Dick sat up and pulled away from him in surprise.

"*Yes.*"

Bruce nodded once. "It was like that after… when Jason came back. Even once I was sure."

"I keep expecting to wake up." Bruce couldn't see Dick now, the moon having ducked behind a cloud, but he could hear the restless rustling of a fidgeting leg against bed linens. "Like I'm going to turn a corner and you'll be gone again."

Bruce remembered Dick's breathless sprint to the kitchen earlier, after he had returned to the study to find it empty.

"I made myself forget," Dick admitted, and he leaned a bit until his shoulder pressed against Bruce's, as if to comfort himself in Bruce's presence even now. "On patrol, I made myself forget you were back, so I could focus on getting the job done. Because I kept thinking… what if I came back and you weren't back at all."

Bruce could see the logic in that. He had done it himself, for months, with Jason, with Clark. Except for when they were standing in front of him, he had to forget to stay focused, to stay sane. So Dick had gone out in Bruce's gear, to fight for Bruce's city, and then come home to find a dead man resting upstairs.

“Nightmare?” Bruce guessed, remembering the way Dick had hovered in the doorway.

“Didn’t get that far.” Dick slumped further, until he could smush his cheek against Bruce’s shoulder. “It was like… like if I didn’t get up, right now, and go look, you wouldn’t be here at all.”

It was the same fear Bruce had every time he closed his eyes.

Bruce hummed thoughtfully, then turned his head and pressed his lips to his son’s scalp. Dick’s hair was still damp from the shower, the ends of the curls soft with the smell of strawberries and a hint of cowl leather that no scrubbing could wash away. “Sounds like you better stay here for tonight, then.”

A huffed laugh then, weak but trying. “What will that solve?”

“I can’t go anywhere if you’re here.” They could keep each other grounded for the night.

Dick hesitated, considering. “You know there are things you don’t know,” he said at last.

It was a test, to see what Bruce would tolerate, where the limits to his love stood. Bruce remembered this from Dick’s early days, but knowing what it was didn’t keep his breath from catching in anticipation and dread.

“I know,” Bruce admitted for the first time to himself and aloud.

“You’re not going to like everything I did,” Dick warned. “A lot’s changed.”

There was that tremor again, that gut-twist at the whisper hissing from Pandora’s box. Tim. Cass. Jason. Dick and Damian’s strangely coordinated partnership. Bruce had hints, the spine of a beast cresting the surface of the water with the teeth still lurking beneath.

“I know,” Bruce repeated, more quietly than before. “But we’ll handle that tomorrow.”

His lower back protested as he sank down, supine against the memory foam mattress, taking Dick with him. “Go to sleep, chum. I’ll be here in the morning.”

Dick slept. And Bruce stared at the ceiling.

Chapter End Notes

SEE? I promised that more was coming! And it's STILL coming, but, as always, my promise remains. Since I don't know WHAT is coming or WHEN or even HOW, each chapter will end with enough of a resolution so that it could be the last. No dangling open fics here, nossir. (That said, I have a rough idea of what the next installment might look like, and it will *not* be Bruce POV finally.)

Also, a quick shoutout to audreycritter for soothing my insecurities with this chapter.

And lastly, if you want a peek at Dick while Bruce was presumed dead, try this: https://archiveofourown.org/works/15549537 It's sort of an AU to this AU, because in this one, I don't think Dick's let himself cry yet.

Chapter 5: Jason

Chapter Notes

Still truckin' along! Please mind the new tags on this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a plant on the windowsill, a springy little geranium. Jason almost didn't notice, too intent on dodging traffic as he crossed the street. He looked up at the last moment, lips compressing as he caught sight of the pale pink petals.

So it was going to be one of those nights.

Jason locked his jaw as he hiked up the narrow, leaning staircase and ran scenarios in his head. Only a few people—one, really—knew the geranium warning, so at least he knew the *who*. It was the *why* that was in flux, and it was never anything good.

The entryway was dark as he unlocked the front door and stepped inside, but there was a far-off glow from the other end of the hall. Jason shut the door behind him and lined up his boots next to the mat. The helmet he hung on the small shelf with his keys, his jacket, and his holsters. Normally, he would sweep the small apartment first, room by room, shadow by shadow, but his visitor was just as paranoid and just as thorough. The safe house was secure, and Jason could trust that.

Of course, that didn't mean that there was no danger present.

Jason left the gun in his waistband and the knife on his ankle as he cleared the narrow entry hallway and ducked into the body of the apartment. The smell of food wrapped around his head like a scarf—Thai, if he judged the spices right. He clocked the bags on the counter first, each piled high with round black containers with plastic lids, then the opened book splayed on the sofa. The apartment was empty.

Bad.

Jason shifted his weight to the balls of his feet and did a slow turn as his hand crept to his back. The bathroom door was closed. With one hand resting on the butt of his gun, Jason crossed the tiny space and knocked on the bathroom door.

“You dead in there?”

Silence, and then, “Food’s on the counter. I brought Thai.”

“Doesn’t answer the question.”

“I’ll be out in a second.”

Still not an answer, but Jason wasn’t invested enough to push. He returned to the countertop and sorted through the food.

The geranium signal had been a good idea, he had to admit. Hood business always left him feeling untamed, like a squid stuffed into a suitcase. It was all lashing limbs and quick, violent strikes, but the core of him was trapped in a tiny little box. He wasn’t Jason out there. He was Hood. Only in the privacy of his safe house could he creep out of the box and unfurl. Unless there was unexpected company in his safe house, in which case he retracted back into the suitcase and started throwing haymakers.

It was a complicated metaphor. He only seemed to work on it when he was tired.

He was tired now, and all signs pointed to a long night.

Jason plucked a container of pad see ew from the bag along with a sheath of chopsticks and shuffled to his chair, flipping on the crappy plastic radio as he went. It would take a second for the volume to regulate, enough time for Jason to sink gratefully into the lumpy recliner and uncap the noodles. The radio settled into a recital of soft classical music—Chopin, he was pretty sure—that still fritzed and fuzzed with static every few seconds. He needed a new radio, a good radio, just like he needed a recliner that wasn’t the color of lint or a sofa that wasn’t more springs than cushion, but he hadn’t gotten there yet. He had the money, not a lot but enough, but buying nice things felt too much like putting down roots. Even the crap he had felt like too much of a concession.

The bathroom door opened. Jason kept his attention on his food, even as his focus followed the whisper-silent footsteps from the door across the small space and onto the kitchen tile. They were evenly paced and steady, a good sign though not definitive. He couldn’t smell blood or bile from where he sat, also good.

When Tim finally rounded the couch and plunked down on the end, Jason risked a look. The kid was in his black base layer, the sweat-

wicking, anti-chaffing bodysuit that went under the Red Robin getup. Jason as Hood couldn't risk a fully suited Red showing up at his place, but neither did he keep a spare change of clothes for the kid. The base layer, which looked like the kind of short-sleeved wetsuit a surfer or runner might wear, was close enough to a compromise that he allowed it. The real suit would be wadded up a corner of the bathroom until Tim was ready to leave.

The black material made it hard to gauge damage, but Jason couldn't see anything major at first glance. No dislocated shoulders, no protruding fractures, no gaping wounds. This was, in some ways, a comfort, but in other ways more alarming than a flank full of buckshot might have been.

Tim—Jason, reluctantly, had begun to think of the kid by his name, at least some of the time–was not welcome in Jason's safe house. Not this one, not any of them. That had never stopped him from popping up sporadically. The first time had been the worst—multiple gunshot wounds, beaten halfway to hell, and a dislocated finger. Since then, the kid would randomly appear, usually while bleeding, limping, or slumping into unconsciousness, and help himself to Jason's medical supplies. He was good about refilling them; Jason had to give him that.

The bloody nights were the easier ones. Sometimes Red would appear without a scratch on him, sometimes with supply refills or food or some other gift, sometimes without. He would crawl in to talk, not *to* Jason so much as *at* him. No participation required. It was like he was so lonely for someone he could pretend was listening, it didn't matter that that someone was Red Hood. Those nights gave Jason a headache.

The other nights, though, the dead quiet ones, those were the ones that felt like a clammy fingertip drawing a line down the ladder-steps of Jason's vertebrae. Tim would sit on the corner of the sofa or on the windowsill and not say a word. Those were the nights that confused Jason the most, but he had almost preferred them initially. He'd given up trying to run the kid off. No amount of threats or gun-waving seemed to scare Tim away, and now that Bruce was dead and Tim was on the outs with the new Batman, it didn't matter much who had replaced whom.

It took Jason a while to piece together the common thread between all of Tim's appearances. It wasn't that the kid liked his company or thought of him as a refuge. It wasn't even that Tim thought his threats

were all bluster. No, nothing like that. Tim only came to Jason when he didn't care if Jason shot him, or was dangerously close to hoping he did.

Jason didn't mind tossing the kit a suture kit or an icepack from time to time, but he didn't pry during the quiet nights. He didn't want to give the impression he cared. Those kinds of questions, that's what family was for, and that wasn't what Jason was. And he'd given up calling Dickface. He'd only done it once or twice, left messages after nights that made the hairs on the back of his neck rise, but it didn't seem to matter. In a few weeks, the kid would tumble back through his window again, looking like he'd been hit by a truck, or he wouldn't.

The question was what kind of no-injury night this would be.

Tonight was quiet, but it didn't feel loaded, Jason didn't think. Tim had bypassed the food to pour himself a cup of water and was currently nursing each sip like it was the finest of bourbons. Jason kept slurping his noodles, gunning for the bottom of the dish. He wasn't about to hang out. That was one of the unspoken rules, too. If the kid was here, Jason would stick around the apartment, but he was no babysitter. He needed a shower. He needed sleep. Couldn't do either of those staring a hole through the living room floor.

When the pad see ew was gone, down to the last fleck and drop, Jason pushed to his feet. He and Tim hadn't exchanged a word between them, nor a glance beyond the first. At some point, the kid had slung his feet up and sprawled across the sofa to stare at the water-stained ceiling. Jason, from the kitchen, couldn't see him when he spoke, except for a black tuft of hair off one end.

"Bruce is alive."

The words were sudden and clear, spoken to the ceiling. Jason set his container in the sink and bit back a sigh as he reached for the dish soap.

"Sure, kid."

He didn't see any point in arguing. If Dick and Alfred couldn't talk Red out of the delusion, what hope did Jason have? Not that he cared enough to wade in. And at this point, he'd heard the speech a dozen times, in a dozen different ways. Fiery, heartbroken, stubborn, passionate, spiteful, no matter the emotion fueling the outburst in the moment, Tim remained fully—delusionally—convinced that Daddy

Dearest was alive. Somehow. Somewhere. Some *when*, even, to hear him say it.

"No," Tim was saying, voice curiously flat. "I mean he's back. Booster picked him up."

Jason nodded to himself as he ran the water. It wasn't until a moment later that the words registered. The plastic container hit the bottom of the sink with a clatter.

"What."

He must have missed something. Must have zoned out along the line and missed the sentence that would make this all make sense. The water was still running. Jason left it and took a step toward the couch.

"Try that again."

A sigh, soft and weary. "I triangulated him, finally. Booster Gold picked him up. Bruce is alive and back in the Manor. Has been for a few days now."

Jason had been jumped more than once in his life. It was a special kind of terror, to be set upon in the dark by unknown assailants. Getting hit was no fun. Getting hit in quick succession by blows you can't even see coming were worse.

This felt a little like that.

Bruce was alive. Bruce was *home*. And he had been for days.

Jason didn't know how to process any of that, so he started with the safest distraction. "You were *right*?"

"Yeah. Go figure." The words held no whiptail sting. On the contrary, they rested flat and empty, dead on the floor.

Jason's eyes narrowed. He walked around the couch, just enough that he could see Tim's face. The kid was still staring at the ceiling, the way one might into an empty blue sky.

"You know, kinda figured you'd be a little happier about this." *This*. Bruce. Alive. "You exhausted from rubbing Dickbutt's face in it?"

"I…" Tim blinked once, slowly, like a slow wipe of the hand over his vision. "I don't know what to do now."

“Do?”

Jason tried to remind himself that questions were bad. Questions were how they got you, like little hooks under the skin, like Lilliputian lines dragging you down. But if he stopped asking the kid questions, stopped digging into the small, containable mystery of why Tim was acting this way, then he would have to turn his attention to the larger issue at hand. He wasn’t ready for that yet.

One of Tim’s hands moved, just a little, an apathetic twitch of the fingers. “I did it. I was right. I brought him back.”

So now what?

The unspoken question hung in the air like smog.

“You…” Jason began, then faltered. Because he could see Tim’s future, or thought he did. Sure, maybe the kid had had a shit six months, but it was over. The door was open. The prodigal could be welcomed back into the fold. One of them, anyways.

“Go home, kid.”

“I don’t have a home.” What a line. It should have sounded ridiculous, like an emotional teenager deep in their emo phase. But Tim had said it calmly, like a truth that he had long ago made his peace with, and he was looking at Jason now, with eyes as clear and empty as the sky.

“Bull. You have the Manor,” Jason argued. “You think he won’t let you back?”

There was no way, no way Bruce would… would come back and not take Tim in. Not a chance. He tried to take *Jason* back, once upon a time, just on his own terms. Didn’t work for Jason, and then he’d gone and blown it all to kingdom come, but this kid? Tim was… he was built to belong.

Jason smacked a hand against the cloth back of the couch. “Get up, kid. Go home. Go conk out on that stupidly good mattress.”

Eat some of Alfred’s pancakes for me. Fall asleep in that one good spot in the sunroom. Lose an afternoon in the library. Don’t waste your life out here.

“It’s not my home,” Tim repeated with the weary patience of wisdom repeated to a stubborn toddler. “They pushed me out.”

“You left.”

Not that Jason had all the details or anything. He’d kept away from that mess. But he knew the Batman, the brother, Dickface was trying to be, and as much as Jason had some old wounds to lick, he knew Dick wouldn’t kick a kid out. All he did know was there had been some kind of blowup, Tim had turfed the Robin gig, and left without looking back. Stupid, but Jason kind of respected him for it, especially now that it turned out that he’d been right all along.

Tim sighed like Jason exhausted him, his gaze on the ceiling once more. “I left. Because Dick wouldn’t believe B was alive, and the brat was hell, and I couldn’t handle being treated like a nutcase *and* dodging murder attempts every day. And then Dick took Robin and I just couldn’t—”

“What.”

“What?”

There was a ringing in Jason’s ears, faint and high like the whine of a mosquito. “What do you mean he took Robin.”

“He…” Tim faltered, eyes flicking to Jason warily. “He said Damian needed it more. He picked… He replaced me.”

A crease appeared between Tim’s brows, the first appearance of emotion beyond exhaustion. “I get it now. Why you were so… It hurts.”

Forget hooks beneath the skin. This was a harpoon.

Replaced. Tim hadn’t given Robin up. It was *taken*, ripped from him like he was the dead one, not Bruce. Dick hadn’t even had the decency to put a cap in him first.

I’m going to kill him. The thought rang clear as a crystal bell.

Jason hadn’t killed anyone in months. Six, to be exact. After the news, he had gone on a tear through Gotham, a bender with a wake full of bodies instead of bottles. He had torn through the city’s criminal class like a tiger’s paw through a house of cards. Even now, he didn’t look too closely at why. He just knew that when he’d come to, soaked in blood and smelling of smoke and gunpowder, the voice in his head hadn’t been his. It hadn’t been *only* his for a long time, but that night his own voice hadn’t been there at all. He had drowned under the

howl of the Pit, and coming up for breath had scared him sober.

Jason hadn't killed anyone in months, but tonight that thought, that voice baying for blood, was all his.

"Robin is yours." He sounded like he was vomiting glass, but the words were right. "Go take it."

"I can't—"

"You *can*." Jason's teeth were bared, his fists clenched, and he wanted to shake the boy on the couch. "That is *your* suit, and *your* home, and *your* family. Yours. Go kick the little fucker out if that's what it takes."

"I didn't know you cared."

"Screw you."

"I just…" Tim got the words out before Jason could storm off, but they seemed to be all he had prepared. He tried again. "Gotham needs Batman. That's all I could think."

He looked tired. Worse than tired, because he'd looked tired for six months, but now he looked like someone had gone and pulled his plug. There was nothing left in him.

"I'm not going to make him choose. Up there, he said…" Tim swallowed hard, scrawny throat bobbing visibly. "He said we were going home. But if I go back, he has to pick between me and the brat, which means he has to pick between me and Dick, and I just… I can't. Gotham needs Batman, and the family needs Bruce Wayne. I did what I meant to do, and that has to be enough."

"That's stupid," Jason rasped. "You know that, right? That's… that's stupid."

"That's what Robin does," Tim retorted bleakly. "Robin saves Batman. No matter what."

"Yeah, and sometimes Robin dies," Jason spat.

"Yeah," Tim whispered. "Sometimes he does."

And that. *That* was too close to the mark and too close to… something.

Jason stomped back into the kitchen where the water was still

running. He shut it off and tried to think. So the kid had to stay the night. That wasn't even a question. Jason was heartless, not stupid, and part of not being stupid meant not ignoring the prickling hairs on the back of his neck. He knew the signs, maybe not of what was planned but of what could be. Dick wasn't an option anymore. The kid had to stay the night. The question was how to make him stay.

He spent longer than he should have on the dishes, scrubbing and rinsing and drying and sorting as he tried to think. His brain was clicking empty, with errant sparks of emotion as its only output. At least there'd been no movement on the couch. Jason hadn't yet decided what he would do if Tim tried to disappear into the bathroom again.

The problem sorted itself. By the time Jason left the kitchen and rounded the couch, brain still clicking and humming with anxiety, Tim was sprawled on the couch, asleep. There was a way a body slept when it had been without for too long, like a man plunging his entire head beneath the water after a death march through the desert. If Jason had to bet, he'd say the kid hadn't slept a wink since Bruce came back.

Bruce.

Jason wasn't sure he believed it. Maybe the kid asleep on his couch had finally cracked, and that's what this was all about. Bruce was dead. He'd died, blown to pieces, scorched into a flaking crust of a corpse. Jason knew this. He hadn't gone to the funeral—that was family only—but he had snuck onto the grounds of the Manor and stood before the unmarked stone. That was what had sold him, the stone. If this were a trick, it would have been writ large, played out with flash and drama for whoever it was meant for—Gotham, the League, the world. Neither Bruce nor Batman did anything by half-measure.

But that stone. That unmarred rock, driven into the dirt next to the headstones for Thomas and Martha Wayne. That was private. That was meant for no eyes but those that *knew*. Jason had seen, and he had known.

He went back once more, a few weeks later, only to find Alfred sitting on the bench before the markers, silent tears streaming down the old man's face. Jason never returned.

He had to know. If Bruce was back, then Batman—the real Batman—

was back, and that was a thing worth knowing.

Jason cast another searching look at the boy on the sofa, but Tim was dead to the world. Enough, at least, that Jason could risk him being alive when he returned. His own rest for a moment abandoned, Jason pulled on a hoodie from the back of his closet, and then laced up his boots. He left a note on the door on the way out.

Leave and I'll kill you.

Chapter End Notes

> Okay, you HAVE to read "Stubborn" by Audreycritter because the third chapter is the direct inspiration for this chapter. Like D I R E C T. To the point that it is branded on my psyche and I didn't even realize it until now, which is why I'm adding the link after the fact: https://archiveofourown.org/works/9425156
>
> The "first time" Jason mentions is the third chapter of this fic: https://archiveofourown.org/works/17535599
>
> Also, I keep mentioning the Waynes being "buried" on Manor grounds. They're not, ish. More on that here: https://archiveofourown.org/works/18458111

Chapter 6: Jason, continued

Chapter Summary

The Manor never changed.

So when Jason hauled himself across the property line, not only did it feel like stepping back in time, but he could do so with confidence.

Nothing had changed, but Jason had changed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Manor never changed. Dig up an old sepia-tinged still from the Gotham Historical Society, place it next to one from last week, and there would be no difference except the topiary fad of the decade. Even modern conveniences and necessities, like driveway lights and security cameras and internet satellites, would be tastefully rendered invisible by careful planning.

So when Jason hauled himself across the property line, not only did it feel like stepping back in time, but he could do so with confidence. For all Bruce's hyper-paranoid tendencies, he never changed the security configurations. Perhaps because it was only family who knew where each camera and trap was tucked. Family, and Jason. That should have been enough to merit a change.

Whatever the case, it made returning easy enough. Not that Jason returned often. In fact, since his return to Gotham, he had been back only twice—once to see Bruce's grave for himself, and once before that to… Well, never mind about that.

But nothing was changed at all. Jason knew the smell of the woods, the little hassocks and ditches. He knew where to duck, where to fade, where to blend into the deepening shadows left by the setting moon. He knew the way a bird knew its way south where around him was the koi pond, the time capsule he had buried when he was thirteen,

the perpetually scorched earth where residents from the decades before had set off firecrackers into the glittering night sky. He knew the curves of the walking paths and how far he would need to walk before the worn dirt would transition into neatly lined gravel. He knew how to walk that crunching path on silent feet until it brought him where he needed to go.

Nothing had changed, but Jason had changed. He had to watch his step in the woods, to make sure his large feet didn't catch on a dip in the earth. He had to bend more, crouching and twisting to make sure the cameras didn't catch the top of his head, the flank of his shoulder. He had to duck beneath the boughs of the tree that stood guard over the little cemetery, because while it had grown, he had grown more.

He had tried not to think on the drive over or the hike through the woods. It was harder than some might imagine. Jason knew they thought him stupid, an ignorant and brutish street thug. They thought his successes could be attributed to luck or a wiley, animalistic kind of wariness, like a rat that learns to evade a trap. And part of that was his fault, because when the Pit drove him… when the Pit drove him, he hadn't been himself. Or he had been too much of the wrong part of himself. He tried not to think about that too much, either.

But thoughts, thoughts, Jason's head was abuzz with thoughts. Like chittering insects, like chirping birds, they pecked at his consciousness. Questions he couldn't yet answer, doubts he couldn't stifle, fears he couldn't ignore, voices from the past, memories indistinct with corrosion. They all silenced as he stepped off the gravel path and stood before the three stones.

Two were old and carved into the shape of crosses. They sat next to each other, ringed with perennial flowers, identical in height and form, save a chip on the arm of the one marked MARTHA WAYNE. They, like the rest of the Manor and its grounds, were exactly as they had been in Jason's childhood. He hadn't spent much time here as a child. The space had unnerved him, though it was a cemetery in name only. No bodies rested beneath the earth. But something about picturing Bruce Wayne, Batman, as a child who missed his parents had unsettled Jason. After his first curious visit, he had only ever returned when Bruce brought him or, once, when he had felt incandescent and impotent with teenage rage and had needed someone—*anyone*—to talk to. They hadn't answered back. He had died a week later.

The third stone, that was new. It was a *change* that imposed upon Jason's attention like a flashing neon sign. Not a cross, because a cross

denoted a grave, and they couldn't do that here, not here in this house that hadn't publicly acknowledged another death. It was a literal stone, a rough hunk of rock pulled from the meandering creek bank in the woods. It bore no name, no dates, no indicator that it was anything other than a chunk of earth. A body lay beneath it.

Looking at it gave Jason a sinking feeling, like falling in a dream, like wreckage settling to the sea floor. The stone was a change, but it had not changed. It still stood where it had been planted, an immovable fact, surrounded by unblemished earth.

He had believed, just for a moment, that the kid had been telling truth. That Bruce was back. Alive. And he had felt—

Jason didn't know what he had felt. He had refused to think about it, had shut everything back in the little suitcase in his mind and refused to think or feel at all. But now he was here. And the grave was here. And Bruce was dead. And he felt as empty as the grave was full.

He wished, briefly, as brief as a dim flash of light, that he'd allowed himself to feel one way or another before reality had narrowed him down to only one outcome. But then the wish was over as soon as it had begun. Jason had learned to kill his wishes quickly.

Jason stood in front of the three markers for a little while longer, unsure of what his next move should be. That's what life was now, a series of next moves. He was fine with that most of the time, because they were his moves, his choices. He chose to kill or not to kill, to protect or to walk away. But now the idea of a next move held no appeal.

He found himself walking around the Manor, found as if coming to in a dream. He didn't remember making the conscious decision to leave the grave. His feet and mind were separate. The former carried him down familiar paths, just within view of the cameras, just out of range of the most dangerous sensors. The latter mulled, gnawing on the issue of the boy on the couch like a dog at a flea.

It wasn't his problem, Jason tried to remind himself. So the kid had officially, totally cracked. And he was on Jason's couch. He'd come to Jason for help. That did *not* mean he was Jason's problem. The kid wasn't family. He wasn't even someone Jason liked. He wasn't even Robin anymore. They had no ties to each other, especially not now that Bruce was… He could feel his brain stutter, like a skip in a tape.

He could see Bruce's bedroom window from where he stood. It was

dark, as it always was now. As it always would be. The drapes were pulled tightly, the Manor's version of mourner's black, and—

Jason's brain stuttered again, less of a skip this time than the whine of a line disconnected. The drapes were open. And a shadow looked down at him.

There was no way to know. It was too far away. Too dark. Too vague.

But Jason *knew*.

He stood in moonlight, staring up at the window, jaw tightening until it ached. Then he turned and walked away.

There was a diner in town. If it had a name, Jason didn't know it. It wasn't on the outskirts or in the center. It wasn't in the poorest neighborhood or the richest neighborhood. It sat on a nondescript block, surrounded by other nondescript storefronts, all a little rundown but with a shaggy sort of charm. The diner wasn't the kitschy vintage kind, with 50s font and pastel striping. It was the legitimate kind, with bones from the 40s but overlapping remodeling from each successive decade, grinding to a plastic-and-formica halt in the 90s.

The food wasn't very good. It wasn't very bad either. It was what one might expect diner food to taste like at 3 AM—reheated, chockful of sugar and salt, and good enough. The main draw wasn't the food or the decor or the location, but rather its proximity to a block of bars that all closed at 2 AM. Gotham's bars were the metaphorical corners of the city, and its people were the dust bunnies. Sweep the corners, and they would blow elsewhere, like a 24-hour diner with dim lighting and squeaky plastic booths.

There was no camaraderie at being a regular of the diner. No one swapped names or introduced themselves. No one made eye contact, even the staff. The diner was a place to be, a place to be left alone, to hunker in a booth or on a stool and wait for the next dismal day to begin.

Jason didn't eat here. He would order a cup of coffee, black and bitter, to warm his hands no matter the weather. He would sit hunched on a stool, elbows planted firmly against the tacky countertop, hands cupped around the chipped white mug, and wait. In time—twenty minutes, an hour, two—the stool next to him would fill with a presence.

He couldn't remember exactly when it had first started, how the arrangement had come to be, what the first exchange had been. He just knew that the diner, in all its ambivalent neutrality, stripped him of being Red Hood, stripped him of being Jason Todd, for as long as he was inside, so that when the man sat beside him, both of them staring straight ahead rather than at each other, that's all the man was. Just a man.

The man arrived twenty minutes after Jason sat down. He had been fast this time. His steps to the stool had been slow, the soft shush of shuffling feet almost lost beneath the warbled mumble over the overhead music. They sat shoulder to shoulder, mirrored in the way their elbows anchored against the counter's edge. The man wordlessly ordered his own mug of coffee, and they waited while the waitress poured.

Jason couldn't see him, and he refused to look. He kept his eyes fixed on the backstop, on the narrow counter where kitschy glasses stood in a jumbled row. He wondered how they came to be here, bearing logos from across the country. He stared at the Dollywood-branded glass in the shape of a cowboy boot and kept tabs on the dark blue hoodie in his periphery.

In the end, he broke first.

"So you're back."

"Yes."

"Took you long enough."

"Yes."

Thanks for the heads up. You're a real peach for calling. No. That wasn't what this was about. But then, neither was the next thing that came out of his mouth.

"Doesn't count, you know."

Silence.

Jason's eyes narrowed, seeing the cowboy boot, picturing the unmarked rock. "You claw your way out of your own grave, then it counts."

A pause, and then a hoarse, "Yes."

Jason was the one who brought it up, but now he found he wanted to back out of that avenue of conversation as quickly as possible. He could see sterile bandages peeking from the cuffs of the hoodie's sleeves.

"You screwed a lot of things up, leaving," he spat out.

"I am… figuring that out," came the slow reply.

Some World's Greatest Detective you are. But he bit that back, too. Jason didn't think he got nearly enough credit for all the things he never said. And that was what these diner meetings were. Long silences. Jason biting his tongue. Waiting.

He wasn't stupid. He knew the silences were meant as a gift of sorts. They seemed like the only thing the man next to him knew how to give. Some days, they were the only gift he knew how to give back.

It was too easy to start a fight. And sometimes a fight was exactly what Jason wanted, but not here. That's not what the diner was for. So instead of fighting or saying words that could lead to a fight, they sat in silence, suffocating under all the things they couldn't say.

"Are you… How are…"

No. Yes. I don't know. What do you care? Do you care? Jason didn't know what his answer would have been, but it didn't matter. The question was against the rules. He cut it off before he could finish.

"Look, I know your hoarding habit has gotten out of hand, but when was the last time you did a headcount?" Jason sneered.

The body next to him tensed. The fingers on the counter, nicked with familiar, faded scars, curled, though they remained just loose enough not to be considered a fist.

The diner's jukebox, a crackling, warbling piece of junk that played without quarters or commands, turned over to the next song. Jason knew it only faintly, an out-of-favor one-hit wonder that was only recognizable now from hold music and off-brand commercials. It added to the atmosphere of unreality, the one that whispered that maybe he wasn't awake, maybe he wasn't here, maybe the seat next to him was empty. He focused on the flat-tipped fingers.

"Here I thought you were a family man," Jason pushed on, tone caustic despite his desire not to fight, because the bite of it gnawed on

him, too. “Or is it just that you have too many brats to keep track of now?”

You forgot me wasn’t a surprise. It was the dull smack of a thrown ball ricocheting off a wall. *I expected better of you* was. Jason had thought he had stopped expecting anything of him.

“What,” the man next to him asked slowly, “do you know.”

What have you done was what he meant.

A request for information, though it was phrased flat and wary. Jason considered lying, saying that he was responsible, that he *had* done something. But his own mind pulled up the image of the boy sprawled on his couch, exhausted and empty. A boy who had turned to *Jason*, out of everyone. A boy who had worn Jason’s colors.

“Have you even looked for him?”

“Outside.”

The order crackled like a live wire, and Jason’s spine stiffened.

“Wh—”

The seat next to him was already empty, the presence at his shoulder, crowding his space, and then beyond. As if the single word was enough to make Jason move, to risk leaving the neutral territory of the diner, to step out where there were no rules to protect either of them.

Jason followed. The diner let him pass unremarked.

Stepping out the door, Gotham air hit him like a gloved punch, muffled and sweaty. The air was thick with city stench, heavy with humidity. He felt suspended in it. Like he was still dreaming. He took in the narrow plot, the back alley lot nearly filled with only a handful of cars, shadows thrown long by the glitching safety lights. The city beyond was crowded out by the backs of the surrounding establishments, all trashcans and employee safety notices.

And then he turned.

And there was Bruce.

“Where is he?”

Jason's knees locked, bracing as he stared. He hadn't seen the body, but he had seen the grave. It was a dizzying swoop to discover that some dormant part of him hadn't fully believed without the body and now was tumbling headlong in an attempt to reorder reality. Because this *was* Bruce. Jason had known it in the diner, had recognized the feel of sitting shoulder to shoulder with the man he had grown up with, but now they were face to face. The labels were back on.

And this was why.

"Tim," Bruce repeated, names now of use again. "Do you know where he is?"

"Don't you?" Jason shot back. Bruce was reading him, like he always did, so Jason slumped against the peeling-paint back of the diner and shoved his hands into his pockets. A risky move. Hands were better visible, but he was worried what his might do.

He expected Bruce to push, to loom, to twist the silence that had been a gift into a battering ram. Instead, Bruce looked away, creased brow wrinkling further. "I've been calling. He won't pick up. He took the battery out of his phone. Dick says his apartment is abandoned."

That was news. Jason hoped, suddenly, that the note on the door did its job.

"What if I did?" Careful, careful, like easing around a street dog. No fear, no hesitation, but careful, careful.

"Did you—"

Did you hurt him? Bruce clenched the question tightly before it could wriggle free, but Jason heard it nonetheless. This was why they had the diner.

He laughed, a bark of caustic spite exploding from his throat, hot as the bloo pounding in his ears. "Me? You really have no idea, do you."

"Jay. Please."

Jason could feel Bruce's frustration—his desperation?—building like an electric charge in the air, but it was the name that did it. He hated how much he wanted to lean into it, like a dog into a gentle hand.

"He came to me." Jason made no attempt to soften the blow, or the ones to follow. "*Me*. For help. Because he couldn't get it from anyone

else. That's how bad it is."

He wanted to leave before any more questions were asked. He wanted to stay, because Bruce was alive and standing next to him without gunfire. Jason risked another look. Bruce was looking away, across the parking lot, jaw tense. It was, Jason realized, the closest they had been without rooftops or masks between them. So were the changes he saw from Bruce's "death" or from before even then?

Start with what was easiest and catalogue quickly. Bruce was chewing through what he had said, but he would be back soon with more questions and a gaze Jason couldn't meet. Quick was the only way. The slight hunch to the shoulders was new. Alfred wouldn't allow that. The hunch combined with a subtle twist to the torso likely meant an injury. How bad? Bruce tended to hide all but the worst, but if it had *been* the worst, he wouldn't have been wandering around the Manor in the butt-crack of the night. Too tired to hide it, then, or giving up a weakness deliberately. For Jason? But he didn't trust Jason. That was easy enough to read in his stance, in the slant of his feet and the readiness of his bent knees.

Too much to parse. Move on.

The extra silver at the temples, that was new. Not that Jason had much chance to study Bruce Wayne's hairline, but he'd seen photos online, the standard pap shots, and Bruce's hair had been as black as ever. And maybe his memories of the before were still messed up, as jumbled and faded as a box of photographs bleached by the sun, but he didn't remember Bruce having that many weary lines on his face. Even so, he knew that face.

Bruce's attention was swinging back, so it was Jason's turn to look away. He wondered when Bruce looked at him, what changes *he* saw. Then he kicked that thought in the face.

"If I went to him, would he run?"

Jason blinked and almost, almost looked at Bruce. What was the world they were living in that Bruce would ask *him* that? He nearly answered—something sharp and sarcastic and likely not true—but then snapped his teeth shut and reconsidered. There were troubles even he didn't joke about. At least not about anyone other than himself.

"Yeah."

There was a long silence as Bruce considered this. “Do you know why?”

“Yeah.”

The silence was back again, this time the pressing, obdurate kind Jason was accustomed to. He pushed off the wall, nerves jangling.

“This isn’t my fight. I’m not getting involved. If you try to *get* me involved, I swear I’ll make you regret it. You want details, talk to your golden boy. This is his mess.”

Jason had no guilt in sharpening the end of that accusation. He didn’t care if Dick’s choice had been right or wrong or some mix of the two. He knew betrayal when he saw it. Dick should’ve known better.

He could feel more than see Bruce nod. The question that followed still caught him like a blow to the back of the head. “Will he be safe with you until I get to the bottom of this.”

Another flat-ended sentence, a question phrased as a statement. A hand, open-palmed and extended. Jason went utterly still.

NO burned on his lips, because NO he did not want to be involved and NO he hated the Replacement and NO NO NO. He wanted to go to bed or maybe leave town for the next ten years. But Bruce was asking. More, Bruce was saying like it was something he would believe, if Jason said yes.

“For now.” That was the best he could do. It would be up to him whether that meant a day or a week or an hour.

“I need to get back.” It wasn’t a thank you, which wouldn’t have been accepted anyways. But it was an offering of sorts. “I shouldn’t be out of bed.”

Jason’s eyes cut to Bruce quickly then at the blatant admission of weakness. He considered the sweat on the man’s brow, the pallor of his skin, his mention that Dick had been the one to go to the kid’s apartment. He filed it away for another day, one that didn’t have him swaying on his own feet with weariness.

“Work fast,” Jason warned. “I’m no babysitter.”

He turned abruptly and began to walk away, hands still jammed into his pockets. His bed was singing a siren song from across town.

“Jay.” The name pulled him to a stop. Jason twisted on heel to look over his shoulder.

Bruce watched him. (Bruce. Living. Breathing.) “You changed your number.”

Jason’s brow furrowed, not understanding.

“Dick checked your safe houses, too. The ones he knew about, anyways.” Bruce swallowed, visibly, eyes steady on Jason’s face. “It was good to see you.”

This was why they had the diner, too.

Jason was already retreating, leaving as quickly as he could without it seeming like a retreat. He threw up a vulgar gesture over his shoulder and didn’t look back.

He waited until he was almost back at the safe house to duck into an alley and weep.

Chapter End Notes

Ohhhhh how this chapter fought me. But I prevailed!

Two related fics for you. The third chapter of this fic is where Jason first helped Tim: https://archiveofourown.org/works/17535599 And here's where I previously established the Manor's body-less cemetery: https://archiveofourown.org/works/18458111

Chapter 7: Damian

Chapter Summary

> *Damian preferred an elevated altitude. It wasn't that he derived joy from heights like Grayson. He was fairly certain no one did. Grayson's love came from the circus upbringing, the comfort on high wires that Grayson sometimes spoke of on quiet nights. Whereas Damian's interest came more from tactical considerations.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Damian preferred an elevated altitude. It wasn't that he derived joy from heights like Grayson. He was fairly certain no one did. Grayson's love came from the circus upbringing, the comfort on high wires that Grayson sometimes spoke of on quiet nights. Whereas Damian's interest came more from tactical considerations.

First, to his eternal consternation, Damian was shorter than many he encountered. Artificial elevation from a crate, a ledge, a ladder, a roof, or other landing ensured him the high ground and therefore the advantage. Grayson assured him that he was tall for his age, but that was a phrase Damian loathed. *For his age.* Grayson might be content to remain substandard, but Damian wished to be tall, period.

Second, thorough training from the League had impressed upon him the advantage of a dramatic entrance. Heights were very dramatic, as they provided ample opportunity to loom intimidatingly from above.

And third, as the masks of Gotham well knew, few people thought to look up. Ordinary people were two-dimensional at best, stuck on a flat plane that encouraged them to look about but never above. Staying as high as possible provided the element of surprise and the advantage of stealth. Even vigilantes weren't entirely immune.

Case in point: Right now, when Damian, from his crouched position in the upper recesses of the Cave, could hear the fight happening below.

At first, he hadn't realized it was a fight. He hadn't paid attention at all, since his attention was not on the Cave floor, but on the hard to reach places far out of sight where the bats kept their young. Damian was careful to give the pups plenty of room so as not to alarm the parents, but he had discovered that if he held completely still for long

enough, eventually the colony would settle and ignore his presence. He liked the challenge of the stillness and the solitude of the space, so he disappeared back there as often as he could without arousing suspicion. While Damian knew the bats' home was known, he didn't want to risk drawing attention to them should Grayson or Pennyworth deem them pests.

The fight had started as a discussion at first. Or maybe it had always been a fight. Damian wasn't sure. Nothing here in Gotham was familiar, even the way hierarchical struggles were handled. Back home, orders were given and obeyed. Bids for power were respected if successful and crushed mercilessly if not. He had never heard anyone dare argue with Grandfather. Challenges were made physically, a test of blood and steel, or else waged in total privacy, with poison and shadows.

So when the… talking began below, Damian paid little notice, beyond to make sure that he remained still and silent, his attention still on the bats above. He didn't mean to eavesdrop—not that he would have been ashamed if he had started listening on purpose. Intelligence gathered was like a good stick. It would come of use in one way or another.

Intelligence was good to have in this strange city, especially now that Father was back. Damian had assumed that his strongest connection would be with his father. They were blood, after all, and Mother had trained him to be the perfect heir. He had expected perhaps not a connection but at least a mutual understanding. Rules he could comprehend and follow. A familiarity. Instead, Father had been as bewildering as the rest. And then he had died, only to return again, just as incomprehensible as before.

Father was the one talking now, below with Grayson in a Cave they both thought was empty. Damian kept half an ear on them while he watched a mother bat groom the pup tucked beneath her wing, but then his attention was arrested by the sound of his name.

The Cave's acoustics were varied. Because of the natural outcroppings and uneven surfaces, sound bounced oddly in the back portion of the space. Though sound carried cleanly in the industrialized heart, Damian's perception was limited by where the speakers happened to be standing, their movements, and the science of acoustics amplifying or dropping sounds suddenly. So while Damian couldn't hear everything, he heard enough.

Father was angry about Drake, that the ex-Robin had been weak and ceded his place to Damian. Damian hadn't realized Father was angry initially. His voice had been so quiet, so flat. Grandfather hissed when he was angry. Father spoke like nothing was different. At least to begin with. He was yelling now. Or… not yelling, but thundering. His voice was low, not raised, but it cracked like a whip in the echoes of the Cave.

"This is his *home*. You had no right to drive him from it."

A reply, inauible, from Grayson, and then, "*Tim* is my Robin."

It hurt to hear. Damian was surprised by how much. He knew Father wasn't fond of him. That had been clear from the start. And feelings didn't factor into judgements. Either he was good enough to be Robin or he wasn't. He just… he had thought he was. Grayson had made him Robin, as was his right as the son of Batman. Grayson had *kept* him as Robin, had treated him like a partner, an equal. There were no equals in the League, only superiors and subordinates. While Father had yet to see him perform in the field, surely Grayson's testimony should carry some weight.

Grayson. Grayson was yelling now, actually yelling. He didn't have Father's control, his voice a bright lightning strike to Father's thunderclap. He was angry at Father, and Damian wanted to be pleased, because Grayson was angry on Damian's behalf, but every new shout brought a sickening twist of fear to his stomach.

The bats rustled overhead, unsettled by the noise, and Damian's fingernails bit into his palms to keep his hands at his sides instead of over his ears. What if Father punished Grayson for his insolence? Damian had never heard anyone dare challenge Grandfather, much less raise their voice to him. Perhaps Father meant his no killing rule, but there were many forms of discipline that could stop just short of death. And if Father hurt Grayson, what was Damian's part? Grayson was *his*Batman.

No, he couldn't abide by this. If they were going to duel over his fate as Robin, he would have a say. Damian braced his hands against the wall and was just about to rise to his feet and move to the heart of the Cave when Grayson let out a shriek of frustration, his voice echoing clear as a bell into Damian's hiding spot.

"You have *no* idea what these last six months have been like! How much *work* I've put into him! You don't care, and you're going to ruin

everything."

Damian froze, every muscle in his body tensing like he had been struck by Grayson's lightning voice. He stayed, listening, as Grayson made it very clear how difficult the last six months had been for him. How much of a burden Damian had been.

Work.

The fight went on for some time more. They fought over Damian, over the mantle of Robin, over Drake, over the role of Batman, round and round. Mostly over Damian, though, at the heart of things. Father did end up yelling more than once. Grayson never really stopped. Damian just wanted them to stop, though he no longer cared who stopped it or how. After all, he had no call to defend Batman, either one, if neither of them claimed him. If it put an end to the condemnations, the truths he hadn't known.

Damian wondered distantly, as he sat and listened to the shouts below, if he would be sent back. He was fairly certain his mother would let him return, if only to keep him out of enemy hands. But she would be disappointed in him. Grandfather would be more than disappointed—at Damian for failing and at Mother for sending him away in the first place. And whatever Grandfather felt would cascade down upon them both.

Eventually, the cacophony subsided and the Cave emptied. Damian was left alone, just him and the bats. The colony squeaked above him, chattering softly to each other in their little families, a soft, warm huddle of bodies cuddling and squabbling and nursing and grooming.

Damian dragged his forearm across both cheeks to wipe them clean, then at last rose to his feet. His knees and calves hurt from the tension, like a night of patrol without stretching. He was not seen exiting his hiding place, nor exiting the Cave at all. The Manor was vast, too accommodating in its layout to avoid others, like the labyrinths beneath the League's various outposts. That was good. He didn't wish to encounter anyone in this wretched, miserable place.

He had almost made it to the staircase when Father appeared, crossing the hall from one room to another.

Father always looked vaguely startled to see him, as if Damian were a particularly striking beetle that had crossed his path or a forgotten houseguest who had stayed past welcome. Damian had thought it was because his mother had hidden his existence until recently and had

hoped that Father would quickly adapt to his presence. Then Father had died and it hadn't mattered. Now he wondered if Father expected to see Drake instead. It made Damian want to break something, but that was forbidden behavior, so instead he stalked past Father quickly so as not to see the dumb deer look on his face.

"Damian."

It was just his name, not a command, but Damian stopped on habit and turned. But while obedience might control his feet, it did not control his face.

"What?" he asked, just short of punishable rudeness. Punishable here, anyways. He would have been slapped in his true home.

Father hesitated, not angrily, but uncertainly. Damian didn't like that. Anger he could handle. Disappointment. Rage. Disdain. But treating him like a volatile unknown was untenable. It made him angry, and anger made him stupid. Damian clucked his tongue and turned away without waiting for dismissal. The skin between his shoulder blades prickled all the way to his room, but Father did not retaliate.

Damian shut his bedroom door and leaned against the cool wood. He eyed the quarters dispassionately. He spent little time in his room ordinarily, preferring to return to it only to sleep. It wasn't a space he enjoyed, but it had its uses. A closed door was respected here, at least for the most part. He would be left alone here. No disapproval, no expectations, no disappointment. But he would only be able to retreat for so long.

At least Father would not patrol tonight. Pennyworth forbade him for at least a few days more. Though that meant Damian would take to the streets with Grayson. He had been worried about the state of their partnership with the return of the true Batman. Had anticipated their nights together with a mix of eagerness and trepidation, aware that they may not have any left. But now it was all spoiled.

Difficult. A trial. A burden that had weighed down Grayson as much as his grief. The angry confessions still echoed in Damian's ears.

Damian considered saying he was ill and calling off patrol that evening, but reluctantly discarded the idea. He was no coward, and he would not relinquish his claim so easily.

He was a Wayne. He was an al Ghul. He was Robin. Whether anyone wanted him to be or not.

Chapter End Notes

I literally dragged this chapter out of me 200 words at a time. Whuff. And y'all, this was suppose to have so much more, but my brain said No, so either I'll get things patched between B and his boy at a later date or this fic is gonna break real bad. (That said, this fic is meant to FIX things so I'll try not to leave things broken for too long. For anyone.)

But also, I've felt bad for people who keep thinking this fic is Done-done, so I've cobbled together a rough idea of how much is left and committed to continuing until it's finished (as opposed to writing each chapter as a potential end), so we'll see how that goes. Will still do my best to avoid cliffhangers, though.

Chapter 8: Tim, continued

Chapter Summary

> *Tim lay facedown, nose smashed into the short, scrubby carpet, and tried to remain still.*

It was a common trope in stories, the camera panning to watch through the protagonist's eyes as a supporting character—a friend, an ex-lover, some plunky tertiary person whose name the audience had only just learned ten minutes ago but already loved—painstakingly crosses a precarious path. They shuffle across cracking ice or a crumbling ledge or a swinging rope bridge, and the audience cares because the protagonist cares, shouting encouragement and direction as the supporting character slowly closes the gap between danger and safety. They look up and lock gazes with the hero. Perhaps they smile. And then the world disintegrates beneath their feet.

The last six months had felt a lot like that for Tim. He wasn't deluded enough to think himself the protagonist in any story of note, and most of the time, he was at peace with his secondary status. He was happy to follow, to support. Life, in a banal, first-world way, had been a crumbling rope bridge slung across a deep abyss, and he thought he had found the path to security. Sure, life as a Gotham vigilante was dangerous and uncertain, but he wasn't walking the path alone. He was following Bruce, following Dick, following Cass even, and that was more than he could have said before.

And then Bruce died. The ice melted. The ledge disintegrated. The plank snapped. And Tim had been in freefall ever since.

In movies, the sacrifice of the two-bit actor always served a greater purpose for the hero. That's what sacrifices were for. It was hard to live a life in freefall, so Tim hadn't tried. He'd just wanted his sacrifice to mean something. It didn't matter what happened to him when he hit the ground, so long as it meant something for Bruce.

Maybe it had been selfish to hope that he would feel something again before he reached that end.

Losing Bruce hadn't felt real. Loss should, especially a loss like that. Tim had wept for his own father, a man who couldn't reliably remember Tim's birthday, but Bruce's death had just made him feel numb and sparkling, like a jar emptied clean on the beach by a

rushing wave.

Tim had been so confused, bowled over by the lack of reality, until he had recognized the sign for what it was. Bruce's death should have been the end of the world. It wasn't. So Bruce couldn't be dead.

Bruce's "death" had been the sudden plunge and everything that followed the freefall. Life was little more than a smeared blur in his periphery. He didn't—*wouldn't*— feel any of it. Not the betrayal of his family. Not the loss of his home. Not the disbelief of his friends.

It wasn't real and it didn't matter.

After months of searching, when Tim had finally found the proof he needed that Bruce was alive, he hadn't brought it to what was left of the Golden Trio. He knew there was no point. He had gone to them before, desperate and certain, and they had ignored him. Superman had thought him weak, broken by grief. Wonder Woman, so passionate about truth, had seen him stuck on his own conviction. They had passed their verdict, and the rest of the League fell in line.

No, when Tim had found his proof, he had called for the Martian Manhunter and *forced* J'onn to see, to listen. And it had worked. J'onn had been his lever to move the whole of the JLA, and through them, he had brought Bruce back.

So why was he still falling?

No, really. Why was he still falling?

Tim lay facedown, nose smashed into the short, scrubby carpet, and tried to remain still. He *was* still, he was pretty sure, only he felt like he was spinning and falling and hurtling into an endless abyss. He didn't know where he was. He could feel the hot skin on his arms above his elbows and up his spine. The carpet smelled like dust and damp and rubbed roughly against his fingertips as he dug his hands into it, trying to slow his descent.

This was bad. It was bad, and he couldn't remember why. The prickling forearms were bad and the spinning in his head was bad and the way he didn't really care that it was bad… was bad. There was something about that, wasn't there? Something he was supposed to remember… or a promise… or something…

Tim reached blindly with one hand, the other still clutching at the carpet, and felt about until his hand closed over the phone. He could

enter in the number blindly, not by habit, because he had never called it before, but by memorization. It was protocol, an old training drill he hadn't shaken, to know his contacts by heart and to be able to dial by touch.

The phone was ringing. He meant to wait until someone was on the other end and then slur out something like *Help* or *Make it stop*, but the world went black at the edges and then staticky in the middle. The next thing Tim knew, there was a hand gripping his shoulder, shaking him.

No, he wanted to say, *stop. You'll knock me loose.* But he felt less like he was falling and more like he was being crushed against the floor. The hand moved up to his forehead and then jerked away as a far-off voice hissed.

There was talking. He couldn't make out the words.

He was gone again.

Returning felt like churning upward through boiling molasses—slow, heavy, suffocating, oppressive. Tim was aware of the weight of it before anything else, the way his limbs felt pinned to the bed and raising up was an unthinkable impossibility. Next was the heat, the way he was cooking from the inside out. Then the steady beeping next to his ear. A heart monitor. Which meant a hospital.

Oops.

Tim couldn't remember what he'd done. He hadn't been out on patrol in ages, a promise to… well, to people who shouldn't be asking for promises like that but did anyways. So he wasn't injured, he didn't think. Had he been hit by a car? He didn't feel broken enough for that. Just the usual brokenness.

Nothing for it but to open his eyes and find out, he supposed.

Tim scraped his eyelids open just enough to peer through the slits and let his gaze rove. The room was smaller than he expected. More like an observation room than a proper hospital room. Maybe he was in the ER? There were posters on the wall, but his vision was fuzzy and he couldn't make out the details. He thought he could see a small counter with a sink and some overhead cabinets. More posters. He turned his head in the other direction, looking for his call bell, and startled to find himself looking straight at Bruce.

Well, this was awkward.

Bruce must have heard him wake, or had been watching him this whole time, because as soon as Tim turned his head, Bruce leaned forward intently.

“Tim.” The name was rich and sweet and warm with concern. No one said Tim’s name the way Bruce did. “Can you hear me?”

Tim grunted. It was a pretty fair imitation of one of Bruce’s own grunts, but it didn’t win a smile.

“You’re at the clinic,” Bruce said, answering the question Tim hadn’t asked yet. “We weren’t sure what was wrong, so this seemed… more prudent.”

In case it was mask-related, he meant. Who was*we*, though? Tim slowly pondered his way through opening his mouth to ask, but before he could relay the information from baking brain to dry-caked mouth, Bruce’s hand was in his hair, brushing the sweat-soaked strands off his forehead. Tim couldn’t decide if he wanted to purr like a cat or weep. Overwhelmed by either option, he sighed and let his eyes slide shut again.

“You have a fever,” Bruce was saying, and that was a balm, too. Because Bruce was here, talking to Tim. “Leslie managed to get it down some, but it’s still higher than I would like.”

Oh, a fever. Right. That’s what this brittle, achey, burning feeling was. That made sense. Tim was glad Bruce was here to piece things together for him. What a relief that was, to let someone else figure things out. It felt like a treat, like a snow day or breakfast in bed. Like Bruce’s hand in his hair.

Bruce was still talking, so Tim tried to pay attention. It was hard to listen, though, with the ringing in his ears. And he kept noticing different parts of him that were hot—a flare from his left shoulder, a hot-numb prickle from his toes. It was unpleasant and distracting.

Whatever Bruce was saying, he was done saying it, because Leslie Thompkins was here. Tim hadn’t seen the doctor in a while. Though she had a reputation in the boroughs for not being a narc, she tattled to Alfred, so Tim had avoided her along with everyone else over the last six months. She looked just the same—tired, stressed, jaded, irritated, but secretly pleased to see them. Maybe. That’s what Dick always said, anyways. Tim had taken his word for it.

Oh, now Dr. Thompkins was talking. Bruce was still running his hand through Tim's hair, but Tim blinked his eyes open wider and tried to pay attention.

"—not very large or unclean, so there shouldn't be this kind of reaction. I'm running tests to see if there's some kind of toxin involved. Who were you fighting? Tim?"

Tim blinked again. His head felt very heavy. "Hmm?"

Dr. Thompkins sighed, exasperated. She did that a lot when they came to visit. "The cut on your leg is infected," she said slowly, enunciating each word clearly like toothpicks punched through the clouded cellophane of his fever. She touched a finger to a spot on the outside of his left leg, just above his ankle. Tim flinched. "Who gave this to you? Did you get a good look at the blade?"

Tim's forehead wrinkled as he tried to think back. He didn't remember being in a fight, not recently. Not since before Bruce came back. After, he'd been too low. Red Robin felt like even more of a joke with Batman back, the real Batman. He hadn't gone out, not in a mask. Then he'd ended up at Jason's and stayed there for a little while, and then he'd gone back to his depressing little apartment and—

Oh. Well now he just felt stupid.

"Just glass," Tim mumbled.

"From a window?" Bruce asked.

Tim shook his head, careful not to dislodge the hand or upset his sweltering brain. Man, he felt *bad*. "Dropped a cup."

That was all. He'd tried to get himself some water, had fumbled like an idiot and dropped the cup, and then a shard had caught him across the leg. Simple. Banal. Stupid. He'd stared a little too long at the broken glass, scared himself, and had gone to bed without cleaning up the cup or his leg. Tim couldn't remember now if he had ever gone back for the glass. He supposed he must have. He hadn't tended to the gash on his calf.

Dr. Thompkins was frowning. Bruce was, too, even though Tim wasn't looking at him. Tim could just do that, sense disapproval rolling in like fog.

"Tim, a cut from a clean glass shouldn't look like this," Bruce said

slowly. That was his disbelieving voice, the one he used when he thought you were hiding something but didn't want to say so outright. It wasn't a tone that used to bother Tim, but did now. After six months of not being believed, how could it not?

"Well, it does," Tim bit out. He pulled his head away from Bruce's hand, which had stopped moving anyways, and tried to look down at his own leg. The effort made him feel cross-eyed, and he slumped back against his pillow.

"Do you know why?" Dr. Thompkins asked. Tim bet if he could see her clearly, her eyes would be gleaming behind her glasses. She was worse than Bruce when it came to interrogations.

"Maybe I stopped taking my antibiotics," Tim mumbled. The doctor made a displeased clucking noise, and Tim covered his eyes with his hand. The lights were too bright. He wanted to sleep. "I just forgot, okay?"

"What—" they both began before Bruce ceded to Dr. Thompkins to finish. "What were you taking antibiotics for?"

This was no longer fun. Not that raging fevers were usually fun, but Bruce was *here* and for half a minute Tim had thought that meant that at last someone else could take responsibility. But he'd forgotten why he'd stop letting other people make decisions for him.

"Can we save the third degree for when I'm not dying?" Tim mumbled. The room, already hazy with heat, was starting to fade, and he was going with it.

"You're not dying," Bruce snapped, and Tim winced. He hadn't meant it like that.

"Tell me what the antibiotics were for and we'll let you sleep," Dr. Thompkins bartered.

However, she and Bruce failed to consider that Tim held the ultimate counteroffer, in that he was very sick and very tired. With his eyes already closed and Bruce's hand no longer in his hair, it was easy enough to let the weight of fevered exhaustion drag him under again. He thought he could hear the wind in his ears as he fell.

Chapter 9: Bruce, a fourth time

Chapter Summary

Bruce called Jason from the hallway outside Tim's room.

Chapter Notes

One more profanity in this chapter, again courtesy of Jason.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bruce called Jason from the hallway outside Tim's room. The phone rang six times. Bruce hadn't considered what he would do if Jason didn't answer. Jason *shouldn't* have answered. Late-night diner meetings aside, they weren't close. They weren't even family, to hear Jason tell it. But Jason had been the one to call first, raising Bruce from an unknown number to bark out that he'd found Tim passed out on the floor, gasping with fever, and was taking him to Leslie. And he had stayed at the clinic with Tim, disappearing only once Bruce roared up to the back door. He had been the one Tim had gone to. He had been the one Tim had called. So Bruce had to know.

"Did you know?" Bruce demanded. He sounded angry. He knew this, could hear it in his own voice when such awareness usually eluded him, knew anger with Jason—with this Jason—was like a match pressed to a Molotov. But there were other priorities at play.

Jason tried to respond with something harsh and profane, but Bruce pressed on. "Did you know his spleen was missing?"

"Who?"

"Tim."

"What? Fuck. No." A beat. "*I* didn't—"

"I know." And he did. Strangely, it hadn't crossed his mind to suspect Jason. Or it had, but Bruce had discarded the idea just as quickly. Jason had been furious when he had called Bruce, a bright, fiery anger fueled by mounting fear.

"How do you—"

"Leslie ran a scan."

Leslie hadn't known either. She had been the one to notice the scar, vicious, gnarled, and still healing, and had run the diagnostics to see what lay beneath. They had both stared at the monitor in disbelief, Bruce with tingling numbness dancing down his limbs. Then he had stormed into the hall, leaving Leslie to monitor Tim.

"Leslie thinks it was a bladed weapon of some kind, maybe three months ago. There was internal damage. As best she can tell, it's healing, but he's missing a spleen."

That was all he knew. Someone had *stabbed* his son. And Bruce had been off in another time, another place. Bruce paced, his own injuries protesting with each step. "Think, Jason. Three months ago. What happened? Who was in play?"

"I hardly keep the kid's day planner for him," Jason snarled.

"Jay." *Please.* It was as close as Bruce had ever come to begging, at least to another person.

"I don't know, okay? Three months ago, I don't remember the kid being underfoot as much, but that doesn't mean anything. Stop hounding me and go talk to Goldie."

Dick. Maybe Dick would know. But what would it mean if he did and hadn't told Bruce?

There was a sound on the other end of the line like a far-off explosion.

"Fun's starting, gotta go," Jason said with a growl that was too much Hood. "I'm tossing this phone, so don't call me again."

"Ja—" But the line was already dead.

The second call was short and just as fraught. Dick answered on the first ring. Bruce had dropped everything at Jason's call, leaving without warning to Alfred or Dick. The discovery back at the Manor had been unpleasant. Atop all that, the ground between Bruce and his eldest was still fragile after their last fight, the air still choked with everything said and unsaid.

In the end, there was little to learn in this call either. Dick had been just as baffled. He was upset he didn't know. Bruce was upset he didn't know. Bruce stayed in the clinic hallway afterward, slumped against the wall with his fingers pinching the bridge of his nose for several long moments. The hallway offered no answers either.

Bruce took Tim home. He didn't know what else to do. Until Tim woke, there would be no answers, and Bruce wouldn't surrender him to a hospital. At home, he would be safe, cared for. Bruce would see to that.

They drove home with Tim laid out on the back seat and one of Bruce's arms twisted around to hold his hand. Tim remained limp as death, and only the heat of the fever kept the memories at bay. At the Manor, equipment from the Cave was relocated to Tim's room, monitoring his vitals with brutal accuracy. The steady beeping was an annoyance and a comfort. The medical detritus felt like a mockery of Tim's usual clutter.

Tim's consciousness ebbed and flowed. After the third day, he was out of danger, the fever low and simmering as it burnt off the remains of the infection, but he stayed awake for no more than a few minutes at a time, and he was never fully present. Sheer exhaustion was what was keeping him under now, if Bruce had to guess.

He could see the signs, now that he knew what to look for. That's what made Bruce angry, that everything had been right in front of his face, and he hadn't seen. His own injuries and illness weren't an excuse. He knew they weren't. Because he had *chosen* not to see, not to notice.

For the fifth time in the last hour, Bruce crossed the darkened room and pressed a palm to Tim's forehead. It was the fourth day now, and the fever seemed ready to break for good. He let his hand linger, fingertips in sweat-soaked hair, then replaced the lukewarm washcloth with a fresh, chilled cloth.

The dim nightlight in the corner pooled shadows beneath Tim's closed eyes, collecting in the sunken, bruised skin. He had always been a thin child, gangly with youth and sharp-boned, like one good break would shatter him. Bruce had worried about that, even in the early days when he had been too low to worry about anything else, how the boy next door always looked one glancing blow away from cracking. Now, six months later, Tim didn't have the substance of glass anymore. He was paper, thin tissue-paper wings a breath away from crumpling.

Bruce should've known the moment he saw Tim that something was wrong. The dark, insomnia-driven bruises under his eyes, the hair that was too long for someone living under Alfred's care, the broken nose, the injuries fading but still too fresh. He was Tim's *father*. His Batman. He should have known.

Recrimination chased him from the room, chittering and mocking like hyenas at his heels.

He came to me for help. Me. That's how bad it is.

That's what Jason had said. Bad. Tim turning to Jason was bad, and not even Bruce's pragmatic hope in his family could deny it. That small morsel of truth had been enough to force Bruce to dig for more, and what he'd found…

Man was not made to be alone, it was said. Bruce hadn't found that true for himself, but it was true for Tim. Tim, of all people, deserved not to be alone. Bruce had sworn to himself, vowed on everything he held dear, that Tim's life at the Manor would not be like his childhood with the Drakes. He had *sworn* it.

Downstairs, Bruce leaned against the edge of the sink, suddenly weary to his bones. He felt like he was back in the Watchtower, dazed and boneless as the world spun around him. He was too much of a realist to think life had ever been simple. Even before his death, life as Batman, life as a father, meant turmoil and heartbreak and exhaustion. But there had been peace, too. Love. Happiness. Sweet moments of serenity. And even the complications had seemed conquerable, like their ends might be just out of sight for him, but those ends still existed, if only he could hold on long enough to reach them. Not so now.

Dick was out with Damian. They had avoided each other since the fight, each interaction carefully positioned to be brief and restrained and to appear like the long gaps in between were entirely by accident. Dick asked after Tim and even sat by the bed sometimes, but his attentions were devoted to keeping Damian focused on his training. Bruce stuck mostly to Tim's room or his own and hadn't crossed paths with his youngest in days. Jason was true to his word. His number no longer worked. And Cass—

There was a thump upstairs. Bruce's head snapped up. Alfred was away for his monthly poker night. The house was empty. Bruce slipped a knife from the block and went to investigate.

Upstairs he found Tim barely upright, on his knees, and clinging to the bannister overlooking the downstairs hall.

"What are you doing up?" Bruce was kneeling, too, knife abandoned on the floor, one arm bracing Tim behind the shoulders. Tim's shirt was soaked with sweat and plastered to the knobs of his vertebrae.

“I can’t be here,” Tim was mumbling. His hands were tight on the balusters. The white of his knuckles made the bruises shine dark against his skin.

“You should be in bed.” Bruce reached to gather him up, but Tim pulled away. Bruce was surprised enough to let him.

“I can’t *be* here. Why am I here?” Tim crushed the heel of his palm into one eye.

“You’ve been unconscious for four days.” It was hard to say around the tightness in his throat.

Tim flinched, surprised, but then gave his head a small shake. “Stupid,” he muttered, more to himself than Bruce.

“Come on,” Bruce tried again. He wrapped Tim up in his arms and bit back a grunt as he levered them both up into a standing position.

“Bruce, stop. I have to go.”

“Yes, to bed,” Bruce agreed.

“No, home.” They were starting to grapple now, both weak, both unwilling to hurt the other, but with determined intent. Tim wanted away, and all Bruce wanted was for him to stay.

“This is your home.”

“No, it’s not.”

Bruce had the upper hand with three weeks of rest, no rampaging infection, and a full set of internal organs. He kept a grip on Tim’s upper arms, supporting him even as he held his son in place. That grip tightened further as he said, “Yes, it is. It has been since you were fifteen. That hasn’t changed.”

“*Everything* has changed.” Tim ripped himself away with a heat that sent him stumbling into the bannister again. “You have no idea. You don’t want to know. *I* don’t want you to know. I-I…”

Tim’s expression crumpled, then just as quickly he pulled himself back together, but the edges were still ripped raw. Tim took a breath. “I just wanted you back. I wanted you back, and I did it. My job is done.”

“Your place here isn’t a job.” Tim knew that. He had to know that.

Bruce hesitated, caught by his own rule. No. Protocol could stand aside, just for tonight. “I know about Robin.”

Tim’s shoulders squared. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“That wasn’t my decision,” Bruce continued. “We’ll figure something out.”

“I said I don’t want to talk about it.”

Bruce reached out again, not to restrain but to press the inside of his wrist against Tim’s forehead. Tim let him, though he kept his weight on the balls of his feet.

“You still have a fever.” Bruce left his wrist a moment longer, then swiped a thumb across the beading sweat. He wished Alfred were here. Alfred always knew what to say. “I was worried. When you didn’t come back. I was worried.”

“I’m fine.”

Bruce *hated* that word.

“You were unconscious with a 104 fever in some random apartment,” Bruce growled.

“It wasn’t a random apartment, it’s *my* apartment.” Tim’s jaw jutted to the side and he took a wobbling step away from Bruce and toward the stairs. “I was stupid not to use disinfectant, okay? I know. Lesson learned.”

“You’re not leaving, Timothy.”

Tim froze, his profile to Bruce, every inch of him rigid. “Yes,” he said in a low voice, “I am.”

“I say you’re not.” That was Batman, the growl, the control, the authority. It worked on every Robin that ever was, every child that had lived in this house.

Tim, shaking with fatigue, nevertheless managed to enunciate with crystal clarity, “I. Am. And you can’t stop me. I was legally emancipated four months ago. If you stop me, that’s kidnapping.”

“You—” Bruce wasn’t often speechless. He was sometimes without speech, but that was his own fault, the way words seemed to bubble and jam in the back of his throat, so that when he was silent, it was

because he had too much to say but no way to say it. Now the words left him entirely, a receding of the tide.

Tim wouldn't meet his eyes.

"You're *sixteen*," Bruce said at last.

"And you were dead."

Tim's gaze flicked Bruce's direction then away. His lips were pressed thin, chin wrinkling, forehead furrowing. He shrugged, one shoulder after the other, like tripping down steps. "You were dead, Bruce. And I was dying. So I got out. And I'm seventeen now."

Bruce struggled to breathe. The words weren't coming.

Sometimes words weren't good enough.

Bruce's reflexes had not left him, not entirely. He was still faster than Tim. His hip let out a shriek as Tim bucked, but Bruce held on, hoisting the boy off the floor and into his arms.

"Bruce, stop!"

It was a father's job to carry his children when they couldn't make it on their own. Bruce just happened to take that promise more literally than some. Each step made his knee crunch and his back twinge and his chest ache, but he had suffered much more in hopes of ending up with much less.

"Bruce, please," Tim said again, with less whine and more heartbreak.

Bruce nudged the detritus out of the way with his foot, kicking aside rolling poles, wastebins, and discarded linens until there was a clear path to Tim's bed. Then he stopped, uncertain. He knew Tim. The moment Bruce put him down, Tim would try to leave again. And again. And again. And again, until one of them broke. Bruce didn't think it would be him, but he also didn't want Tim to break. He wanted Tim to stay, to agree to stay.

"What do you need?" Bruce asked at last.

"What?" Tim's face was smashed into Bruce's chest. His question came out muffled.

Bruce loosened his grip enough for Tim to lift his head, so he could look down and see his son. His back crackled. He held steady.

“What do you need?” Bruce asked again. “To stay.”

“I can’t…” Tim’s breathing was ragged at the edges, loud and frayed in the quiet room. He swallowed. “I can’t stay here when they’re here. I can’t. I’m sorry.”

They. Damian. And Dick.

Bruce had been home for three weeks, and every day broke his heart in a new way.

He bent and lowered Tim to the bed, then stepped back. There were things he could do as a father, and things he could not.

“I’ll be okay,” Tim promised quietly. He sniffed and rubbed the back of his hand against his broken nose. “I’ll be more careful, I promise. It’s okay.”

It was said man was not given more than he could bear. Bruce didn’t know if that was true. He didn’t know how much more he could bear. But, today, it seemed the answer was just a little more.

The call was brief. The penthouse was still available, with supplies ready for both day and night life. Bruce would arrange it so Alfred would deliver anything missing tomorrow, along with Damian’s kitten. There was little else to coordinate. There was little else to say.

Bruce didn’t know how much damage he had just caused or how long it would take Dick to forgive him. But he knew, of all the things he could do as a father, letting Tim leave was not one of them.

Bruce placed the phone on the end table, then fetched a clean, oversized shirt from the dresser. He squatted, the corners of his eyes wrinkling as his knees cracked and popped in protest, pulled the sweat-soaked t-shirt over Tim’s head, and let it fall to the floor.

“Arms up.”

“Bruce?”

Bruce waited. Tim lifted his hands. Bruce pulled the fresh shirt on, then braced Tim to help him lie back on the bed. The old shirt was thrown into the laundry hamper and the water glass by the bed refreshed while Tim watched silently. When he was finished, Bruce stood by the bed and gave Tim a nudge with the back of one curled finger.

“Budge over.”

Tim blinked at him.

Bruce sighed. “I’m tired, Tim.” He rested a hand on his son’s head, palm cupped against the curve of his skull. “Make some room.”

Tim made room, and Bruce sighed again as he stretched out on the edge of the bed. The muscles in his back threatened to seize, then slowly relaxed inch by inch as he forced himself to breathe. He would find no rest tonight, which made it no different from the nights before. He couldn’t rest with his family scattered. He was so tired.

“Bruce,” Tim whispered, “are you sure?”

No. And yes. There was no right choice, no decision he could live with, not when protecting one son meant hurting another. Bruce reached across and brushed Tim’s hair back once, then again, gratified as Tim began to relax under the repetition.

“Wildflowers,” Bruce mumbled.

“Mm?”

He hadn’t meant to say it out loud.

“In the Watchtower,” Bruce explained quietly. “Your hair. It smelled like wildflowers. Alfred only buys strawberry.” It had bothered him, the change. It had bothered him more when he realized it was just another sign he had missed.

He pressed his nose into Tim’s hair and breathed deep. He had promised himself in the Watchtower that they would do this more, that he would make up to Tim all they had missed.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “that I wasn’t here for you.”

“You’re here now. That’s what matters.”

No. *Now* was limited. It would never be able to compensate for what he had missed. But, Bruce thought as he closed his eyes, lulled by the rhythm of Tim’s heart beating against his side, he would do what he could to make the coming days count.

And those days, those days were good. Bruce had never thought the empty days after Jason’s death were ones he would ever want to revisit, but the time after Tim’s return home felt like a second chance.

They were gentle, unhurried hours, healing for them both. Bruce wasn't quite well enough to return as Batman, and though the need to *do* still pulled at him, it was easier to ignore the call of the city knowing that he was needed right where he was.

Tim's fever broke and did not return. He wouldn't tell Bruce who had stabbed him or why, just that it had happened outside of Gotham. Bruce decided not to push, for now. He did tell Bruce a little about the virtual therapy sessions Jason had forced him to start with Dinah, and Bruce made sure those sessions continued. Leslie delivered a new round of antibiotics. Tim took them at breakfast every morning as Bruce and Alfred watched.

Their time was not wholly idyllic. Dick didn't call or answer when Bruce called him. Jason remained off the grid. Bruce's chest continued to ache when he walked by their doors. And every glance at Tim was another reminder of how much Bruce had missed. Tim had lost the last, lingering curves of baby fat from his face, the softness stripped away by grief and an unexpected growth spurt. That same growth had lengthened him. Though Tim remained short for his age, the extra inch of height felt like a foot to Bruce. Seventeen. He had missed an entire birthday.

There wasn't much in the way of household activities, a strange turn for two people accustomed to filling their days with problems. Some days, Tim couldn't get out of bed, so Bruce stayed with him. Some days, Bruce found himself reading article after article of reports from when he was away—doomscrolling, Tim called it—and Tim sat slumped next to him, his attention on his own phone, the weight of him keeping Bruce grounded. They were companions in a way they hadn't been able to be the first time around, not often speaking, but content to rest in each other's company. And Alfred orbited around them both, silent in his own judgement, but supportive as he could be.

It might, Bruce dared to think, be okay. He didn't know how to mend things with his other children, but if he could brace up Tim, that was a start. Hope was too big a word for what he was feeling, but it was something more than nothing.

So they kept their holding pattern, Tim healing, Bruce hoping, Alfred waiting. Until the day the call came that Damian had disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

Got stuck on this fic, started a new fic to buy myself some time,

got stuck on that fic. So here I am, heelying in a month later with a smoothie and a new chapter. Only no smoothie because that would require me to go outside.

Chapter 10: Damian, again

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The trick, as far as Damian was concerned, was to find the right people before the wrong people found him. And there were many wrong people to avoid.

He had a plan. He had six plans, actually, each fleshed out to varying degrees. Two had come with him to Gotham, fully formed and refined further as the days turned to months. The other four he had added as time passed, two in quick succession after the explosion and the funeral, and then two more to ease his own anxiety in the rocky months that followed. The seventh was more of a vague inclination than a plan. He had let it falter, thinking that, perhaps, it might not be needed after all.

Foolish.

This plan was none of the original six, but rather a hybridization of two of them. Gotham, in its landlocked state, was a nuisance, and being in its heart rather than on its suburban fringes required alterations. The state of the plan's execution allowed for changes as well. Damian had crafted his plans assuming he would be relentlessly pursued and so had built in multiple contingencies. Those would not be necessary now.

Damian slumped down on the ledge and tugged the hood low over his face as he watched the road below. The bus would arrive in fifteen minutes. It was a slower method than he would prefer, but it was a fine line he walked. The most efficient methods, like vehicle theft, would alert Batman. The faster public modes would elevate his risk of being spotted. Car services required an electronic payment, which he had but would be traceable. He had time before the eyes watching the Penthouse realized he was no longer there. All he needed to do was reach his destination before pursuit caught up with him. And, of course, there was little danger from the Penthouse itself or from the Manor.

He had very little with him. He should have had nothing. After all, he had come with nothing, so it would be fitting to leave just as empty-handed. But in the end, Damian had slipped into the pocket of his

jeans a handwritten recipe card for Pennyworth's scones and a Polaroid photo taken at the park. Everything else remained. Even his kitten. He would miss his kitten.

Fourteen minutes until the bus came. Damian wet his lips and reviewed his plan again. When the bus drove past his watchpost, he would climb down. He would board the bus and choose an advantageous seat just before departure, to deter being followed. He would ride the bus twelve stops, then board a second bus to the city limits. From there, he would take a third bus to the local nature preserve. Then he would walk. The League had an outpost northwest of the city, hidden in the foothills. If he could reach it without being detained, he would then need to convince those responsible for guarding it that it was worth their time not to kill him and to deliver him home. If one or both of these conditions were not met, he would leave a trail of bodies that would make him much easier to track, one that would require Batman to pay attention.

It would be easier for all involved if he were allowed to return without struggle.

He tried not to think about what would happen once his journey had ended.

A bus drove by. It was not his. From where he sat, he could see no suspicious activity, no skulking figures from the League or its enemies waiting to snatch him up. Damian ignored the stirring deep in his stomach, that low, uneasy murmur that maybe there was no trouble because no one at all cared if he left.

"Damian?"

The voice sent a jolt up his spine. This was not the voice he had been expecting, or had hoped for.

Damian looked between his feet, down the brick side of the building he had chosen as his perch. A man stood on the sidewalk, looking up at him, pale face bright in the moonlight and framed by a nondescript hood similar to Damian's own.

Damien tried to gauge if he could disappear before the order came. But Father pointed a finger at him, the command clear as if he had spoken aloud.

Stay there.

Again, there was time to calculate the repercussions—what he might avoid by leaving anyways, what consequences he might accrue by being caught a second time. Best, he thought, to wait and see what happened next. Father had no interest in making him stay, so perhaps it was merely a matter of formal dismissal. There would be punishment for improper procedure, but then nothing else would prevent Damian from leaving.

Damian pulled his legs in and sank deeper into the shadows of the brick outcropping. It took Father longer than expected to scale the inner stairwell, and when he pushed open the outer door, he was moving stiffly. Damian had seen the medical report and wondered which injury was yet unresolved, then decided he did not care. It wasn't his place to care, not anymore. The injuries must be nearly healed now, he supposed. The Batman and Robin of the last few months would fade away, replaced and forgotten.

Father stood before him now, three or four yards away. Damian would not squirm under his scrutiny. It was the most direct attention Father had given him since his return.

"Are you alright?"

Damian blinked, caught off guard by the question. He lifted his chin. "I am uninjured."

Why would he be hurt? He had been in no battle.

"Dick called." Father was still studying him, his own face expressionless and unreadable. Damian could feel the weight of his study like a finger pressed against his face, dragging down his nose, across his cheek. He fought the urge to brush it away. "He went to your room and it was empty."

Damian had spent a lot of time in his quarters at the Penthouse. Though still spacious, the Penthouse was much smaller than the Manor, making it harder to avoid Grayson. And he desperately had wanted to avoid Grayson. The wise thing to do would have been to pretend like nothing was wrong, but the exile from the Manor had come like a knife to the gut. He had failed. Father's rejection of him was final, the mantle of Robin would return to that intruder Drake, and so much as looking at Grayson reminded Damian of the *work* Grayson saw wasted when he looked at Damian.

Tonight had been the first night with a bright enough moon to risk the hike. Day would have been better, but he had been foolish. He had

wanted to bid Gotham farewell when it looked how he remembered it best.

Father stared at him still, waiting for something. What, Damian didn't know. The uncertainty was there again, the way Father eyed him as if he was a strange and unknowable creature. It gave Damian no power, just made him feel like a cuckoo in the nest.

"May I sit?"

Damian hated questions that didn't require an answer. He hadn't realized that before, not until Grayson. Grandfather and Mother both would speak rhetorically, veiling orders and punishments alike as questions. Grayson never did. When Grayson voiced a question, he would then wait until he received an answer, repeating the query if he must. It had taken Damian a long time to understand. He was still getting used to the concept, to be honest. He supposed now he never fully would.

Father lowered himself down onto the ledge with a stifled grunt closer to a sigh. They stared together out over the city. Damian wondered if they saw the same thing. If they would ever see the same thing. He had much in common with his mother, but there was still a gap between them, an undefined difference he had never fully been able to bridge. That was to be expected. Mother, in many ways, was unknowable. But he had studied Father. Researched. Sought to know him and be the best son and heir possible. And yet he had been rejected. He couldn't tell what Father was thinking, what punishment he had planned, what would come next. Well, whatever it was, he would not flinch from it. He might be a miserable Wayne, but he was an al Ghul even still, and al Ghuls did not retreat from pain.

"How did you find me?" Damian asked at last, when it seemed Father would sit and stare for the rest of the night. *Why were you even looking? What did I do wrong?*

"It took a while," Father admitted slowly, his eyes on the horizon. "I'm sorry. We weren't sure what your goal was. It took longer than it should have."

We? Did that mean Grayson was searching as well? Why? And why wasn't he here instead of Father?

"I called Dick on my way up," Father said, looking to Damian now. "To let him know you'd been found. He was worried."

That should have warmed him like a cup of tea on a cold morning. It did not.

Damian scowled. “If you mean to punish me, please proceed with haste. My bus will be here in ten minutes.”

Father’s eyebrows rose. The expression made his forehead crease. The sickness in Damian’s stomach coiled over on itself. He didn’t know what that expression meant. He hated that he didn’t know.

Father looked away, down to the road below. “Where are you going?”

“Home.” Damian’s grip on the ledge tightened further. “To Mother.”

A muscle in Father’s muscle jumped, and his lips thinned as they pressed together. It was how he looked every time Damian mentioned his mother.

“Are you that unhappy here?”

Damian stiffened at the unexpected question. “Does it matter?” he asked angrily.

Father’s attention was on him fully once more. The hood shadowed his face, casting half of it into gloom, and Damian couldn’t search him for lies when he said, “Yes.”

Yes, he was unhappy. He had been unhappy from the moment he had been dropped on the Manor steps like forgotten luggage. When Father had died, he had been so sure he would be sent home. Instead, Grayson had put on the cowl and given Damian the Robin mask. And Damian had felt… not happy. Not quite. But almost like he belonged.

But he hadn’t. He hadn’t belonged anywhere. Not with his father. Not by Grayson’s side. Because he was *work*. He was a burden. And still he had held on through determination, through spite, and then Father had kicked him out of the house. Had kicked them both out of the house. Grayson would have been able to stay if it hadn’t been for Damian.

Damian said none of this. He looked out over the city instead.

“I…” Father began, then stopped.

“It is important to me,” he began again, each word a slow grind of a winch hauling thoughts up from a deep well, “that you are happy. I

want you to be happy."

"Do you?" The question fell free before he could catch it. Fear made the words come out cold and rigid, like a knifepoint. "That would require you to think of me, Father. And I doubt very much that you do."

"I—"

Damian's grip tightened on the ledge as the heat rose in his face. "Mother sent me here to learn from you, but you do not teach. Instead, you ignore me, and then you banish me."

He needed to remain calm. He needed to control his tongue. But he was so *angry* and so tired of this stupid city and its stupid rules that he didn't understand.

"It was not my intent to hurt you," Father said quietly, as if that mattered at all.

"You regret sending me away, then?"

The muscle in Father's jaw jumped again. "I… regret handling it as I did."

"But not sending me away." Damian's eyes narrowed.

Father did not answer.

Damian turned, pivoting up on one knee to face him. "Even Mother had the decency to tell me to my face when she was sending me away, not hide behind a phone call like a coward."

This was dangerous, speaking so directly, so disrespectfully. But Damian didn't care. His eyes were burning and his face felt like it was on fire and his throat was so full of rage that it pushed everything that had been trapped within him out into the open air.

"I am your blood son and your heir. *I* am the only other true Wayne in this city. And you choose to take my birthright from me and give it to that weakling, that impos—"

"That's enough."

Father did not raise his voice, but it felt like a strike to the face nevertheless. Damian cut short, breathing heavily in the sudden silence.

“Tim is my son, as are you. The Manor is his home.”

“But not mine.”

The pause that followed said enough. Eight months in Gotham, nearly six as Robin, and he could claim none of it for himself.

Fine. *Fine.* Damian stood and dusted the grit from his hands. “I will meet my bus below.”

“Damian, wait.”

Wait? Eight months he had waited and he had worked and he had *tried*. And now he had less than he had started with.

“If you’re leaving because you think I want you to—”

Damian, already partway to the rooftop door, turned back again, surprise drawing his eyebrows up.

“You do not want me in the house. You do not want me… out. You told Grayson that you will not accept me, that you will only allow that —will only allow Drake by your side. Mother may not want me either, but at least she has not lied to me.”

He needed to get away, right now, before he did or said anything else he could not control. Damian stormed to the exit, legs quivering against the impulse to sprint, and ducked into the stairwell, slamming the door shut behind him.

He would not cry. He would not cry. He would. not. cry. Grayson had said that crying was not wrong, but Grayson was a liar and an idiot. He would have to leave all of Gotham’s lies and Gotham’s weakness behind him if he would survive reentry into the League.

The bus was four minutes away. The covered overhang was empty and the area vacant. A woman and her dog passed by, its tags jingling as they passed. Damian waited until they were out of sight before sitting on the covered bench and pulling his knees up to his chest. Let the enemies of the League capture him in these remaining minutes, if they dared try. At least then he would have something else to focus on than the horrible feeling filling his chest and stomach.

That feeling only intensified when a man approached in his periphery. Father, mouth drawn into a hard, straight line, stood at the edge of the covering.

Father held up a hand before Damian could speak. The words came slowly, but surely, with no hesitation that Damian could seize upon. “I am not here to make you stay. I realize no one has asked you what you want in any of this. So if you choose to go, I will not stop you. But I ask that you do me the courtesy of hearing me out.”

Damian hesitated, wary of hidden strings, but Father said nothing. He merely stood, waiting in return, hands hidden in the front pocket of his hoodie. Damian was tempted to let him wait the full four minutes before boarding the bus, but Father had spoken to him not as a child, but as an equal. Slowly, Damian dipped his chin.

Father sat on the other end of the bench and bent forward until his elbows rested on his knees. Rather than look at Damian, he looked at his hands, the heel of his right thumb pressing into the palm of the left as he massaged the muscles there. The decision made it easier for Damian to remain still, now that he could study rather than be studied.

“I never expected to be a father,” Father began. His voice was low and sandpaper rough, as it had been ever since his return. This confession, Damian knew, was not something a parent typically confessed to offspring, and the unexpectedness of it made him lean forward slightly.

“I chose Gotham a long time ago. I chose...” Father continued, letting pauses fill in the space of what they could not speak aloud. “Dick was not a choice, not at first. I only meant to help. Even once I accepted that I could be a father to him and still do what needed to be done, I didn’t expect…”

Damian watched, fascinated and a little horrified, as Father’s throat bobbed with a hard swallow. “When… when your mother returned with you, I didn’t react well, I know. I was… upset. But it was never at you.”

Damian clicked his tongue. It had seemed like it was at him. Father nodded, as if agreeing. “I know. There are many things in my life I would change, if I could. How I acted then is one. But Damian, it was never because I didn’t want you.”

He wanted to believe that. He did. But Damian had never been one to believe in fairy tales. “I heard you. Your fight with Grayson downstairs. You were very clear.”

Father, who had returned to massaging his hand, went still as stone.

“Ah,” he said at last. “I’m sorry, Damian. That is not a discussion you should have heard.”

“Fight,” Damian corrected.

Father ducked his head, mouth twisting in acknowledgement. “Fight,” he agreed. “I was angry at Dick, for how he handled things with Tim.”

“For choosing me.”

“For choosing a path that I thought caused harm to someone I love.”

That seemed clear enough. Father loved Drake, for reasons Damian couldn’t comprehend. He did not love Damian. And so he chose Drake as his Robin and his son. None of this changed Damian’s choice to leave, so he wasn’t sure why Father was wasting both their time.

Damian pulled back, attention shifting away from Father and down the road, in the direction the bus would come. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “Grayson doesn’t want me either.”

“Why do you say that?”

A stupid question. “Because I heard you fighting,” Damian reminded, fingernails digging into his palms. “He said I was work. A burden.” He had thought they were partners.

“Oh sweetheart, no.” Damian stiffened, unsure what to do with the unexpected name or the warmth in his father’s voice.

“Damian. Damian, look at me.” It wasn’t an order, at least not like any order Damian had heard before. It was soft and sad and felt like fingertips under his chin, turning his head.

“I promise you, Dick does not think you’re a burden, and neither do I,” Father said. Damian had thought he would prefer Father to look at him any other way than his startled, dumb-deer stare, but this way, this sadness, it was too heavy for him to bear, especially when paired with a lie.

“I *heard*—” he began to insist, but Father shook his head.

“I know,” Father interrupted, voice still gentle. “And I know why you interpreted it the way you did.”

He paused again, gaze drifting as he thought, and Damian hated not knowing if he was trying the best way to phrase the truth or to find a

better way to lie. The bus should have been here by now. Where was his escape?

“You have a kitten,” Father said suddenly, and Damian’s heart wrenched.

He did. He had. It was a beautiful little creature with black fur and a white chest and a pink nose. It was the smallest, softest, most wonderful thing Damian had ever seen. But he had left it behind in his room, tucked into the sweatshirt it loved, with detailed instructions for its care in the hopes that Grayson would pass along those notes to whoever would keep it next. He didn’t think Grayson would turn it out onto the streets again. He hoped not. He wished he could have kept it with him, but he knew better than to bring such a fragile thing within Grandfather’s reach. Better to break his own heart now than risk his kitten’s later.

Father was still waiting for an answer, so Damian nodded, swallowing hard as he did.

“It was a stray?”

Damian nodded again.

“Did it come to you immediately, or did that trust take time?”

Father was asking questions he knew the answer to. Damian could tell, though he wasn’t sure the purpose or how Father knew to begin with. Father had been dead—presumed dead—when the kitten first came. They had never even met. Damian had been careful to keep his pet hidden in his room when Father returned, for fear he would be angry at the addition and order it away.

“It took time,” Damian answered when it became clear that Father expected a verbal response. The kitten had hissed and spat at him for some time. Damian hadn’t minded. He was so much bigger than the kitten, and it had no way of knowing he was just trying to help.

Father nodded. “It was work. Good work. Worthwhile work. But work nonetheless.” One corner of his mouth twitched, though whether it was meant to turn up or down, Damian wasn’t sure. “It took time for me with Dick. Jason and Cass as well. I don’t love them *in spite* of the work it took. I love them, and that’s why I do the work.”

He looked to Damian again, blue eyes deep and shadowed but steady. “Do you love your kitten less, because it didn’t trust you right away?”

Damian frowned despite himself. Of course not.

“That’s why we fought, Dick and I. I ruined the trust he had worked to build between the two of you. He was angry with me, not you.”

That didn’t seem right. It was too simple. They were fighting about him, so they must be angry at him. And it didn’t explain why Father refused to accept him as Robin, why he looked at him the way he did.

“You look at me as if I am a stranger to you, or a foe,” Damian whispered.

“I know,” Father said, equally quiet. “Dick was angry at me for that, too, and he was right. He put in the work. I have not.”

His gaze remained steady on Damian’s face, and for once, it didn’t feel heavy or burdensome, just present.

“I want to be a good father,” Father said with the same deliberate slowness as before. “But I do not think that I am. Or, at least, not as good as you all deserve.”

Damian couldn’t speak to that. He just had the one father, this one, and only for very briefly. It was not what he had expected, nor had he found the experience to be enjoyable. But he couldn’t say whether the fault rested with the father or the son.

“I would like to start again, if you would let me,” Father offered. “Or, at least, give me time to try.”

It was tempting. To return to Grayson, to pretend that all would return to normal, to assume he would be able to take his rightful place at his father’s side, all of that was a powerful lure.

“Who will wear the mask?” Damian asked.

Father shook his head slowly. “I don’t know.”

It hurt to hear, but at least it was the truth. Another lie would have been the end.

“Will Grayson and I be allowed back?”

“I don’t know that either.” Father’s mouth did droop then, upset deepening the lines of his face. He didn’t seem to take pleasure in the admission, but that didn’t lessen Damian’s hurt. “I made a unilateral decision for all of us, because it was the choice that needed to be

made at the time. That won't be the case now. The Manor is your home, but it is Tim's home as well. Whatever decision is made, it will need to be settled between the four of us."

Another hesitation, then, as Father's lips parted and he weighed on them what he meant to say next. Damian found himself holding his breath as well. The answers he had received weren't what he wanted, but they were the truth, at least.

"If you will consent to give me time," Father said, picking and sorting his way through his words, "I would like to get to know you and for you to know me. I would like to… to be your father, and to earn that title, if you will let me."

"And if I wish to return to Mother?" Damian asked.

The same muscle in Father's jaw twitched again, but Damian could see no lie on his face when he said, "If you decide to go back to her, I'll take you myself."

"You don't like her. Why?"

A strange expression pulled at Father's face, a mixture of emotions Damian couldn't name. "I have a hard time forgiving anyone who keeps me from my children."

Damian held very still as Father reached out and rested one large, heavy hand gently atop his head. He could feel the warmth of his palm through his hair. "We must both learn to forgive together, mustn't we."

Damian didn't know about all that. Forgiveness seemed like an unnecessary bother. But Grayson thought it important and so, it seemed, did Father. Maybe he could learn to pretend. Father dropped his hand, and Damian missed the warmth, but then Father stood with a groan and a pop of knees and held out that same hand.

"Will you come back with me?"

Damian hesitated, gaze straying back down the empty, yellow-lit road where the bus should have been. His place in Gotham was by no means secure. Father would neither promise his cape nor his home. But, if Father were to be believed, neither he nor Grayson wanted him gone, and if Damian truly wished to leave later, no barriers would be put in his way. Father would even deliver him himself, bypassing all the mess with the buses and the hiking. He had very little to lose by

staying longer, and much to gain, provided he trusted Father's promise.

He thought he might.

Damian gave a short nod and allowed Father to pull him to his feet before withdrawing his hand into his hood pocket. Father's mouth twitched again, and this time, Damian knew he meant to smile. It wasn't the way that Grayson smiled. When Grayson smiled, it was with his entire face—mouth and cheeks and eyes entirely transformed, radiating warmth. Father's face barely changed at all. It was just the corners, the way the lines softened. Two different smiles, but they made Damian feel the same way.

They left the covered stop side by side, two hooded figures with synchronized steps. Damian looked back over his shoulder only once, a frown on his face.

"Problem?"

"The bus should have come ten minutes ago. What abysmal service."

Father chuckled, the sound quiet but deep and rich from the back of his throat.

"What? What is it?"

"It's Tuesday. That's a Monday/Wednesday/Friday bus this month."

Damian let out a disgruntled noise partway between a growl and a snort, making Father laugh again. Gotham was an illogical, miserable place down to its very infrastructure. Damian was still huffing in irritation when Father's phone rang in his pocket. Father murmured an apology before answering.

One of the cars was waiting around the corner—not the work car, of course, or even one of the flashier models, but an understated four-door in dark grey paint. Damian kept an eye on Father's face as he climbed into the passenger's seat and buckled in. The conversation was brief, but whatever it was changed Father's demeanor entirely.

"Yes. Yes. Right now. I can—Yes. Just keep—Yes. I'm on my way. Yes. And Clark? Thank you."

Father was already kicking the car into gear as he ended the call.

“Father?” Damian ventured. His stomach sank as Father startled and looked down at him blankly, as if he had forgotten Damian was there at all. But then Father’s gaze sharpened and he smiled.

“I have to go out of town for a few days. Would you like to come?”

Chapter End Notes

I knowwwwwww. I know. But this one was incredibly hard to write and also wow 2020 has been an eon. At least it's long? These two boys are VERY hard to make talk, but once they get going, they really go. Also, the next chapter is one I've been waiting to get to literally from the beginning, so that's fun.

ETA: Hi! There seems to be an individual having difficulties in the comments. I've reported them to AO3, as they've moved from leaving incomprehensible notes on my fic to harassing other commenters. I ask that everyone please refrain from engaging with them. It would be neither kind nor useful. I'm screenshotting and saving all comments for Staff to review.

Chapter 11: Cass

Chapter Notes

> Listen, I warned you I had no idea where this is going. That means I also have no idea how many chapters it will take to get there. At least two more, I think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She was on a train. It had been a long time since she had been on a train. Trains weren't common in the United States, which she thought was stupid. Trains were good for going places. She was going places. She wasn't sure where, but wherever it was, that's where she was going.

Cass blinked slowly and tried not to grimace. Her eyelids felt dry and abrasive like a cat's tongue. She had last slept. . ., She tried to count back and failed. She missed the sunglasses she used to have, the ones with massive black lenses that wrapped around her entire face like a disguise, like armor. She missed her actual armor, too. Her armguards were hidden beneath the sleeves of her hoodie, and the flexible kneepads beneath the legs of her pants, but that was all she had kept. Those were pieces that allowed her to move swiftly, silently, secretly. Those, and the knives hidden on her body and in her bag, she considered her due. The rest she left behind, along with the rest of her life.

The train's swaying tugged on her chin, making it droop. Cass tensed and curled inward, pulling her feet up onto the seat. She would have to sleep soon, just not yet. She felt the space between her and Gotham like the hot breath of dogs at her heels. It wasn't the distance so much as the layers, the number of false leads and switchbacks and blind alleys she had placed between herself and those she had left behind.

There weren't enough. She knew it, but she couldn't bring herself to care.

Cass tugged the lip of her hood down to lie flush with her eyelashes and did her best to keep her mind off the others. That was how she thought of them, The Others. It wasn't that she disliked them. They were humans she had allowed in her space for some time, after all. Dick had been kind to her, all smiles—closed, once he saw how teeth made her uncomfortable—and soft tones. Tim had avoided and

befriended equally, swinging wildly depending on how secure he felt, how uncomfortable she made him, how lost in his own problems he was. And Alfred, Alfred called her Miss Cassandra and hung loose sweaters with soft sleeves in her closet and stocked the pantry with her favorite seaweed chips. Even the little one, Damian, hadn't been so bad. He had been horrible and venomous, covered in prickles that stung and scratched, but Cass knew the potency of her own defenses and the need from which they sprung. She couldn't fault him for his.

But they weren't family. She had only had one family, and that was gone now.

She hadn't stayed for the funeral. There was no need. She had seen the body. It wasn't the first body she had ever seen, but it was the first of someone she knew. She had known it filled, glowing with life and intention, crackling full with the person she loved and trusted. And then it was broken. Empty. Alfred had cried. And she had left.

Cass didn't think the others would come after her. They didn't consider her family any more than she did them. They feared her. She could see it in the way they looked at her, in the careful steps they took around her, in the way their eyes clung to her when she sparred or danced. She had needed them to fear her at first, and then she hadn't known how to make them stop. But she hoped, now that she was away, that they would be content to forget about her. They might not be her family, but they were his, and she didn't want to hurt them if she didn't have to.

She didn't know what came next. She had never much need for planning, at least not more than her next meal, next rest, next moment of want. It hadn't been a plan that sent her away, but instead the instinct that where she was was no longer safe. That was a feeling she knew well and never ignored.

So she was on a train. *A midnight train going anywhere,* like the old song. He had liked that song, had mumble-sung it under his breath in a voice like a warbling dog when it came on the radio. The ache built in the back of her throat.

She would get off at the next stop, Cass decided. They had crossed the border three stops back. The next stop was good enough. She would get off and… and...

Her thoughts faltered, sputtered to a halt as the train sped on. She had no *and*. Maybe she would catch another train. Or a bus. Or hitchhike.

Maybe she would find a dry, secluded corner and catch a few hour's sleep. Maybe she would find someplace she could call her own for a day, but no longer.

Cass would land on her feet. She always did. She might break an ankle or two when she hit, but she would stagger off in the direction of a new life. She would make it. She would keep going, like a train, not a silly, gas-propelled car. Another reason trains were superior. And tracks. Trains had tracks. They weren't really going just anywhere. They always went *somewhere*. And when the tracks ended, the train stopped.

Grief, hot and suffocating and unexpected, flooded her throat and pooled in her eyes. She had thought Gotham would be her end of the line, not just a waystation. But her family was gone. Her dad was dead. And she was on a train, with every sway of the carriage taking her deeper into the night.

Seven months later

She was being watched. Eyes had followed her all day, skittering over her skin like sugar ants under her clothes. Cass knew she was sensitive. Though she worked to make herself invisible, it wasn't uncommon for a stray gaze to brush against her. There were too many people in the world. She would feel their eyes pass over her like a shadow over the sun.

These eyes were different. Their gaze was neither casual nor fleeting. Someone was *watching* her. It had built on her slowly, like pressure in the air before a storm. She had been loitering out of reach of a food cart that morning, stomach rumbling at the smell of cooking meats and simmering spices, waiting for the moment when the vendor's back was turned and she could snatch breakfast from the bin where customers left their discards. When the fine hairs on her arms had stood on end, she thought he had spotted her, but his face was turned away. No one stared back from the crowd of waiting patrons. No amount of careful scanning had identified the watcher. Spooked, she had abandoned her meal and slipped away into the crowd. The gaze had followed.

All day the feeling had stalked her, a constant presence. It drove her mad, until she felt like hooking her fingernails beneath her skin and flaying herself bare. She couldn't tell what direction it was coming from or if it was one person or several. A team might explain the skill,

how none of her tricks seemed to work. Nothing could explain how she felt stalked in an empty room.

It was time to go anyways. She had spent nearly two weeks in the city, too long in one place. The stay had seemed important, the time she needed to finish her business, but now she knew the truth. This was her fault for growing complacent. The cost was the small cache belongings left under a carefully placed garbage heap in a back alley. It was a meager collection at best—a spare change of clothes, an extra knife, a couple trinkets. Nothing she would miss for their value, but she would regret them just the same. There was very little she could call her own, and now there was even less.

Still, worth it to escape the eyes.

She was hurrying now, threading her way through the busiest parts of the city like a mouse in tall grass. If she couldn't lose her watcher, maybe she could confuse it long enough to make her escape. The movement, the noise, the smells, the chaos of bodies buffering each other as they hurried in all directions, it would be enough to confound any person, any machine, no matter how they chose to track her.

Cass ducked behind another food cart, then lowered herself through a loose storm grate into the city's belly. The city was no quieter down here, the roar of transportation rumbling the walls on either side of her, but at least the layers of asphalt, concrete, and dirt dulled some of the sharp edges. Even more importantly, there was no way anyone could have seen her come here. She could follow the drain to the end, to the station, where an underground train would be waiting.

Instead, there was a man. She had looked before crawling from the drain, and he hadn't been there. But between turning to shut the way behind her and turning back again to the disused maintenance hallway, he had appeared. He now stood watching her, empty palms lifted to show he meant no harm. As if Cass were stupid.

Hands held death, but so did keen eyes and a sharp mind, and this man had both. He stood with curved shoulders, but his body held power. And what deceit with his body could fool her now, with the weight of his gaze tracking her every twitch? This was her watcher, a stranger who had somehow tracked her across the city, through the worst she could give. He had not only followed her underground movements but had anticipated them, beating her to the train station.

The tiled floor beneath her feet rumbled as she held completely still,

like a bird in the bush. She didn't think she could disappear again. The hallway was empty. There were no weapons except what she carried with her, nowhere to hide except the grate at her back. But if she held very still, he would have nothing to read on her until the moment she decided to—

"Cassandra."

Cass's gaze, which had drifted over his shoulder to the potential escape beyond, snapped back to his face, sharpening to a stiletto. Blue eyes, soft but wary, held steady. They glowed as they regarded her, and Cass's stillness broke as she recoiled.

Alien eyes. She knew them.

If Superman was here, it was by request. Who would it be? Dick, most likely, but it could be Tim. Not the little one, not unless things had changed radically in the last six months. If she was being hunted, it wasn't for reconciliation. Was Gotham in danger? Was she the danger? Had they allowed fear of her to gnaw at their bones?

Cass's head whipped around, seeking the real threat. A second body stood where she expected it to be, blocking the hallway from the other direction, a black shadow outlined by the flickering overhead fluorescent. Too broad for Dick, too tall for Tim, but it didn't matter. Someone in their circle. Someone at their command.

Anger with teeth like dogs electrified her skin. She left. She surrendered Gotham to them. All she asked in return is that they leave her be, and still they sent a pawn after her. And should she fight, should she kill in self-defense, that would be her fault, not theirs, and all the more reason to trap her, capture her, keep her.

But then the shadow lowered his hood and her world went cold.

His hair was shorter than it had been last, carefully sculpted back when before he had been a week away from his next cut. The length made the silver ends shine, glimmering frost amid the dark that had been singed black or burned down to charred flesh. It would smell like strawberry now instead of smoke.

The damage was gone. She could see no bones, no burns. There was a slice across one cheekbone, already fading away into pink, healing skin. He had more wrinkles, new additions to the creases she had liked to trace with her fingertips. But she knew that face. She knew that frame.

Cass rose from her crouch. Took a step. Stopped.

“Sweetheart,” Bruce said, and she launched herself forward.

He caught her first blow on instinct, forearm blocking forearm with a power that sent echoes up into her shoulder. The second blow landed, and the third, and the fourth. Each hit felt like a weeping wound.

She didn’t realize he wasn’t fighting back until they were both on their knees. He pinned her arms to her sides, wrapped around her like a hug. It wasn’t a hug. Dead people didn’t hug.

“Cassandra—”

“No!”

He did, he smelled like strawberry and aftershave and good, clean soap.

“No!” Cass shrieked again and bashed her head wildly against his. He jerked back, sparing his nose but clipping his chin against her forehead.

The pain didn’t register. What was a papercut to an amputated limb?

“Ca—

She didn’t realize she was crying until he had pinned her arms to her side and pressed her face to his chest. It should have felt like a hug. It wasn’t meant to be.

Cass struck again, legs doing the work that arms could not. The moment’s pause was enough for her to break free, crawling backward on gritty tile until she was out of reach. Her mouth was too full, her chest too tight, and her hands shook as she raised them.

You died. You are dead.

No. I—

She turned her face away, blocking out what came next, and only turned her face back as the rest came. **I saw you.**

His face pinched in the corners, scrunching tight with regret. **I’m sorry. It wasn’t me.**

It was. She had known him. Alfred had cried.

It wasn't. It's… complicated. His fists crossed, crooked fingers passing each other but never touching. It was like inside her head, the image of the body on its table, him crouched before her now, layered but not touching.

You left me. She could leave him. The presence at her back was gone, the watch lifted now with Superman's duty fulfilled. She could run again. Instead, she stared, looking for answers in the lines of his face.

"I came back." He said the words like they were supposed to mean something. His fingers twitched, like he was thinking of reaching for her again.

Cass's body flinched backwards even as her screech flung forward. "LEFT."

It was his turn to flinch. The others never believed that he did. They only saw what they wanted to see. A face of stone. A body like a door they could beat their fists against. He was their anchor point, immovable. But she could see it, not in the way that he moved but in how he didn't, entire body bracing against a blow. In the way his eyes grew shadowed.

He flinched. She saw. And she was glad of it.

LEFT. She spat the word and flung the sign as one. She wanted to claw it into him, like nails into his skin, like every single lonely, empty day she had lived since he left her alone.

He took the blow and didn't reach for her again. Instead, he crawled, still on his knees, to the blank hallway wall and leaned back against it. His bones crackled and popped before settling into a meditation pose. She stared, wariness twitching down her back and into the empty air behind her like a tail.

When he spoke, he didn't look at her. His voice stayed low and steady, like the far-off rumble of thunder or the roar of the ocean. It ebbed and flowed but never stopped. He told her about his return—the confusion, the cold room, the forgetfulness. He told her where he had been, just pieces. Another place. Another time. She was too angry to hear of it right now, and he knew it. He told her how he had fought—to come back, to get her back. Of calling in a favor with a friend, and of that friend calling in favors with others, using connections fantastic and mundane to search the globe for one missing girl. Of the return call and the flight. Of careful eyes watching her through the city.

She didn't care what he said. Words weren't what mattered between them. The words were empty. The voice was like a slow, calming stroke down a cat's back, soothing and settling. And the body was what mattered. The body told the truth.

They had done this before. In the beginning, he had sat against a slimy Gotham alley wall and spoke nonsense to the air as she watched from the edge of an overflowing dumpster. She hadn't understood a single word then, but she had allowed herself to listen and to watch and to be lured until the distance closed and… there she was, next to him, a hand in his.

This time, he spoke until his voice was faded and hoarse, more grinding gears than roaring sea. And still, at the end, she found herself next to him. The wall and floor were both too cold and sent shivers up her spine, but his eyes were warm when he finally turned his head and looked down at her again.

Warm and sad and so full of the love she had missed that her own eyes welled up again in response.

He lifted one hand, palm up, asking and waiting.

Cass closed her eyes, new tears flooding already sticky cheeks, as his hand rested heavy and soft against the top of her head. When she leaned in, he gathered her close and pressed his lips to her forehead. He let her cry into the soft folds of his clean shirt, and when she hiccuped, he rubbed her back until she settled again.

"I'm so sorry, love. I'm so sorry."

"Hate you," she whispered, because she did, and she could, and he would let her for as long as she needed to. Already, he was nodding, chin thumping gently against her forehead.

"I know."

"Missed you."

"Missed you, too."

Another solemn kiss, scratchy from the faint stubble, was placed on her forehead, then a third, by request, on her cheek.

"Home?" he asked.

She nodded. Yes. She was home.

Chapter End Notes

🎶Strangers waiting
Up and down the boulevard
Their shadows searching in the night
Streetlights, people
Living just to find emotion
Hiding somewhere in the night

The spiritual predecessor to this chapter is: https://archiveofourown.org/works/16730115/chapters/39243351 (or maybe this is the spiritual predecessor to that?)

"But didn't Dick say—" Yes. We'll get to that.

Also, as noted on other fics where Cass uses ASL, sign is not a representation of English. It is its own language and must be *translated* into English. I am not fluent in ASL, so I'm never ever going to attempt a literal translation. Assume what she signed works with ASL's grammatical structure and vocabulary and that I made it work in English. (That said, the sign for "complicated" is direct from Google.)

ETA: Anyone looking for more of this specific Cass should finish this fic first but then go read my fic (S)kittish next.

Chapter 12: Alfred

Chapter Summary

> *The farmers market came to Gotham once a week. Every Thursday, long before the sun cleared the smog-smudged horizon, white trucks pulled up and rolled high their doors. At 8 o'clock, the market officially opened and customers began their circuit, each choosing their preferred route suited to their tasks. Alfred Pennyworth was among them.*

Chapter Notes

> Posting this before I change my mind.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The farmers market came to Gotham once a week. Every Thursday, long before the sun cleared the smog-smudged horizon, white trucks pulled up and rolled high their doors. The parking lot would slowly transform from flat, empty pavement to an asphalt field of white-peaked tents. From 6:30 AM to 8:00, workers moved from truck to tent and back again, methodically constructing their little kingdoms. At 8 o'clock, the market officially opened and customers began their circuit, each choosing their preferred route suited to their tasks. Alfred Pennyworth was among them.

The vendors all knew him, quiet and kindly Mr. Pennyworth with his checked flat cap and tidy, handwritten list. A few knew with whom he was employed but most did not; none cared. He was a good customer, inclined to the best each stall had to offer and exacting in his tastes, but generous both with the change he would wave back into the till and the grandfatherly arm pats dolled out to the new workers bristling with eagerness.

Mr. Pennyworth's routine was as regular as the turn of the proverbial clock. He began in the eastern corner of the market, both hands resting on the bar of his little pushcart. His list was a permanent fixture in his breast pocket, and he rarely deviated from it, though small treats for others in his household could prove a worthwhile temptation. He always came alone. There was no Mrs. Pennyworth. No companion to guide him by the elbow.

But some Thursdays, a young man would join him. They never came

together. Sometimes the young man didn't show at all. When he did come, he seemed to have no pattern, no set routine, but he and Mr. Pennyworth would inevitably cross paths, like two magnets on a string, and finish the rest of their shopping together.

The market was a hotbed of gossip—about each other, about new vendors, about the customers. About Mr. Pennyworth and the handsome young man who always walked just a half-step behind, as if Mr. Pennyworth were a treasure that needed guarding from the rest of the market, or as if the man's shadow wasn't a close enough position to spend time together.

Alfred, for his part, didn't know the initial direction of the gossip. He was aware of the benign curiosity of the market, but he didn't notice the satisfied pursing of the baker's mouth the first time he introduced his companion as *my grandson, Jay*. No, he was too busy pretending not to notice the flush coloring the tips of Jason's ears. That introduction had come many months into their not-quite-happenstance meetings. He hadn't wanted to risk scaring the boy off. The first time their paths had crossed, Jason had withdrawn from Gotham entirely for a full three weeks. Even now, well into their established routine, Alfred was never certain if his Thursday would include company. Jason came and went as he felt comfortable, as he had time, as his relationship with the others evolved or devolved. And so, as Jason was unpredictable, Alfred made sure he was entirely predictable. His reward was a presence at his elbow and the peace of mind that, for this week at least, he had staved off another loss.

Although it appeared that his losses nowadays were not so final as they had once been. His family, once seemingly fractured beyond repair, had its missing pieces restored and was slowly beginning to mend. Alfred smiled to himself as he placed the bag of homemade lemon drops in his pushcart. Cassandra, that dear girl, would be home soon, and sour things had a knack of bringing a smile to that sweet face. With that task done, and a wrapped caramel deftly slipped into Jason's jacket pocket, Alfred moved along to the next vendor.

Jason followed silently. He always had been a quiet boy. All of the children could be quiet, of course, sometimes unnaturally so, as their work demanded. But when granted individual time, the others tended to talk. Dick was a chatterbox, good-natured and bright, his ambling speech a way of indicating that he was happy you were here. Damian, that prickly child, tended to speak in demands and boasts, though Alfred was not completely blind to the eagerness to please that lurked underneath. Timothy, who was often painfully reticent in a group

setting, seemed to split at the seams at the relief of undivided attention. Alfred had had little time to discover what Cassandra was like alone. But Jason, Jason above all the others was content to wait, to be, to soak in the presence of another like a healing balm.

At any rate, silence was safest, most of the time. Jason's relationships with the others were contentious. Alfred did what he could to float above the churn. He had no way of knowing when a truce would abruptly crack like a rotting limb beneath his feet, or, more rarely, when a bitter divide would spontaneously heal. The animosity between Jason and Timothy, for example, was longstanding, but had undergone some mending over the last several months. Alfred hadn't known. It seemed there was much he hadn't known.

"A party?" Jason asked drily as he accepted the wrapped rack of lamb from the vendor and set it gently in Alfred's basket.

"A homecoming," Alfred replied. Questions were rare between them, at least of the probing sort, and he picked carefully over what else to add. The truth, for the moment, seemed safe enough. "Master Bruce and young Master Damian will be returning from overseas this evening, along with Miss Cassandra. The lamb is for tomorrow."

"Thought the brat didn't eat meat."

"He doesn't. There will be salad, risotto, and a mushroom wellington as well." Another careful consideration. "Besides, I am not sure if Master Damian will be joining us."

"Oh? B finally get tired of his mouth and chuck him out?"

Alfred's lips pursed, but he kept the line of his shoulders straight and at ease as he stopped at another stand and eyed their peppers. Jason, when he did speak, had a tendency to prod for a reaction. He was, in many ways, still a child in a man's body.

"Master Dick has taken him to live in the penthouse," Alfred explained with an ease he did not feel.

Jason snorted. "Figures. Everyone's gotta take their turn on the outs, right?" He quieted for a moment, his hands—the only part of him Alfred could see in his periphery—stilling before he murmured, "Good for the kid, though."

Then the hands tightened into fists and Jason turned away to busy himself with the tomatoes. It was a slow breath on Alfred's part that

finally linked *kid* to *Timothy*. Damian was always "the brat" or "the gremlin." Timothy had always been "the replacement," a designation that made Alfred feel like he was kneeling graveside again and again. If Timothy had been downgraded to "kid," a term that was almost affectionate in nature, perhaps a genuine reconciliation was on the horizon.

"Blueberries," Alfred decided aloud, even as he planned his next delicate foray. "For blueberry lemon tarts."

A small jar of apricot preserves appeared before him, held aloft in Jason's hand. Alfred's lips twitched into a smile. He placed the jar in his basket. "You recall the recipe."

Jason shrugged and pointed across to where the blueberries waited as he said, "We made it together the summer I broke my arm. You taught me how to crack an egg one-handed."

Alfred remembered that summer in a hazy, golden way, though it hadn't felt so at the time. The official story was that Jason had broken his arm falling off his bike. The true story involved a fall from a much greater height. It had been no one's fault, other than the criminal Bruce and Jason had been chasing at the time, but the injury had felt —as all field injuries felt—like a blow to the chest. Alfred knew that his family had each come to their chosen double life of their own volition. Even as a child, Jason could have been dissuaded no more than Bruce himself. Better to let him go with supervision and the full might of the Bat Cave's technology protecting him. But each injury, large or small, was a reminder of how fragile they all were, how close to disaster they danced.

Jason had been benched for six weeks to heal and recover. Alfred had stepped in to fill the void left by nightly duties, having learned from Dick's childhood not to assume obedience without enticement. They were goodhearted children who wanted to help, to protect. One fractured ulna would not diminish that drive. Kitchen lessons were one such tool in Alfred's kit, and together they had spent the summer working their way through an assortment of old family recipes and meal staples. Alfred had cherished those sunny afternoons together. More so, after Jason's death.

"They are Master Timothy's favorite," Alfred explained, voice still hushed by the memories. He dusted himself off internally, straightened his shoulders, and lifted a small container of blueberries for inspection. "He is unlike you or Master Dick. He must be tempted

to eat. And so I tempt."

Jason grunted. That was a better reaction than Alfred had dared hope for. He considered the conversation peaceably ended by that grunt, so he was surprised when, after a silence, Jason spoke quietly from behind him.

"He'll eat Thai."

Alfred hummed, an acknowledgement without an interruption as the information was carefully filed away. He waited, gaze fixed on the deep blue berries, fingers busy but focus latched onto the boy behind him. Nothing more came. Alfred took a risk.

"He was in poor shape when he arrived. I hear that without you, he would have been much worse."

"Alf…"

They were both turned now, produce and pretense abandoned, though Jason's gaze stayed on his hands, his shoes, anywhere but Alfred's face. This was uncomfortable for him, for both of them. They were on fragile ground, the space between them mined with too many forbidden subjects. Neither wanted to fracture their peace.

But Alfred had stood over too many graves. And after every loss, every devastation, he had told himself *Never again.*

A woman, hemp tote swinging with the weight of her purchases, jostled them both on her way past. Alfred reached out and snagged his grandson's elbow. Jason let him, then followed when Alfred gestured to a quiet spot behind the tents, away from the lazy bustle of the market.

"I have buried too many," Alfred began, voice low and pitched for his companion's ears only as they walked. "I could not have borne another loss, not… not so soon after…"

It would have killed him. To lose a boy like Tim so soon after losing Bruce, it would have killed Alfred. He had already felt like he was dying day by day, the grief wearing on him like water on rock. Only the belief that he was needed had kept him going.

There was a bench. This time it was Jason's turn to lead, to guide with hesitant fingertips. Alfred was grateful for the opportunity to sit before he collapsed. He was strong, so strong, because he had to be, but that

fathomless abyss, that what-could-have-been, was still so close. If he stood too near, the gravity of it would tear him asunder.

Alfred's eyes burned. He waited. He breathed. Jason sat beside him, not touching but waiting as well. He needed to conclude this moment and return to shopping. Jason was much like Bruce in that his willingness to shoulder a burden for those he loved never ceased to astound Alfred. But that willingness was not without limit, and an emotional moment such as this one was indeed a burden. Push too far and Alfred risked driving the boy away, perhaps for good. That, in itself, would be another kind of death. But Alfred needed to know.

When he spoke again, Alfred was relieved to find his voice bricked steady once more, even as the words crowded and pushed at the base of his throat. "Did Timothy ever say why he went to you?"

Jason made a noise, a soft sort of huff, but Alfred hurried on before he could be misinterpreted. Timothy's reasons for seeking out Jason were his own, and they were Timothy's to tell. That wasn't what Alfred wished to understand. "Did he say why… why I was not an option?"

There were many unknowns that haunted Alfred, and this was one. Bad enough that Timothy would come so close to death's door without Alfred knowing, but why had it ever come to that point? Alfred had thought he had earned some modicum of affection, of trust. He loved that boy as if Timothy were his own flesh and blood. He would have died for him, willingly. So what had struck out Alfred as a potential source of aid?

Alfred risked a glance at Jason's face. If a lie was imminent, even if meant in kindness, he wished to catch it. So he watched as the boy's creased into a grimace, though one of hurt or reluctance, he couldn't be sure. It was only when Jason spoke, gravelly voice soft with hesitance, that Alfred could put a name to the confusion that lined his face.

"He said Dick picked the gremlin over him."

It was not the place to correct the label, to remind Jason that Damian was just a boy with a name of his own. Nor was there the emotional stability to correct Timothy's perception of events. He would see it that way, as Dick choosing Damian over him instead of Dick doing his best to limit worst possible outcomes. Dick had been grieving—they all had been—and Damian had been in desperate need of a purpose to rein in his more destructive tendencies. Perhaps they had placed too

much faith in Timothy's dependability.

"That does not answer my question."

Jason's face seemed to further compress in confusion.

"*Dick* forced him out," Jason said, placing particular stress on the name. For once, it didn't seem that the stress was supposed to denote insult.

"And I am not Master Dick."

"No, but we all know—"

Jason's teeth clicked, snapping shut to trap the rest of whatever had nearly followed.

"What is it you know?" Alfred prodded gently.

That was frustration making the muscle in Jason's cheek jump, Alfred thought distantly. It was certainly frustration that turned the boy's head, forcing his gaze away, into the unchallenging distance.

"Jason?"

"He's not angry at you." Jason's voice was almost pleading, all posturing stripped away. "I'm not either, Al, honest. I was. I used to be. But I swear I'm not now. We all get it, okay?"

"Cease with the riddles, please." He felt dazed, winded by the compounding words that meant nothing but seemed to be building to something. Perhaps he shouldn't have asked, Alfred thought briefly. But he had, and now he was to learn.

Jason's hands clenched and unclenched on his knees, tendons straining. "You raised Bruce. His parents hired you, and then it was just you and him. You're the Wayne butler and you're his family. He comes first. He always comes first. Even before us."

That… that wasn't right. Alfred didn't—Yes, Bruce's wellbeing was important to him, but he…

It felt like a single light blinking steadily in Alfred's head, a point he was trying to crawl his way to in unrelenting darkness. Because what Jason was saying wasn't right, and besides—

"Master Bruce was dead," Alfred breathed, a stumbling block in his

path in the dark. They were speaking of Timothy and of Dick, not a man Alfred had thought was lost forever.

“And Dick was first,” Jason finished. “With Bruce out of the picture, you back Dick. Or maybe Damian as the blood son, but either way, the result’s the same.”

“No. No, that isn’t…” Alfred tried to swallow, but his mouth had gone dry. “If he had reached out to me, I would have…”

“You’d have to ask him,” Jason said in a low voice, “but I got the impression that that wasn’t something he could risk.”

To be rejected again, he meant. To be turned away by another member of his family. For Timothy, Alfred wouldn’t have been a place of safety but merely another potential blow to weather.

No. Jason was wrong. He had to be wrong. There had to be another explanation. He would return to the Manor and ask. Maybe if aided by freshly baked tarts, he could tempt the truth from Timothy.

The silence proved too much for Jason, who stood abruptly. “I, uh, got some things to take care of, so I should head out. I’ll drop some cash with Luz for those blueberries on my way.”

Alfred’s hand snaked out and pinched Jason’s sleeve between his fingertips, stopping him before he could walk away.

“You didn’t come home,” Alfred said. His heart pounded in his chest. It seemed that once he allowed himself to push for answers, there was no stopping. “We thought Bruce was dead. You claim to stay away because of him, but he was gone. Why did you not come home?”

He looked old, this boy. At times, Alfred could still see the child he had been, awkward and unsure and still so eager for all that life had to offer. But now, as Jason stared down at him and grief as stark and heavy as a gathering storm lay across his face, Jason looked too old for his years.

“We’re past that, Alf. We have been for a long time.” Jason’s hand rested on Alfred’s, then gently lifted his fingers free of the sleeve. “And you never asked.”

Alfred remained on the bench for a long time, his hands clutched in his lap.

Chapter End Notes

Do you all have ANY IDEA how HARD it is to get Jason Todd and Alfred Pennyworth to talk about FEELINGS???? DO YOU????? Ugh. Anyways, thanks to everyone for your patience. I hope you enjoy this chapter, because I predict the next one is going to be just as hard.

Chapter 13: Tim, once again

Chapter Summary

> *There wasn't much to pack. There never was. Maybe that was weird. Tim was rich, right? He should have a lot of stuff to pack.*

Chapter Notes

> oh my lands y'all, it was not supposed to be this long
>
> do I mean the gap *between* chapters or this new chapter? the answer is yes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There wasn't much to pack. There never was. Maybe that was weird. Tim was rich, right? He should have a lot of stuff to pack.

It made him feel guilty sometimes, the privilege of it all. He had been born into wealth, into excess, into security. And it stood to reason that access to money meant access to things, but those *things* left him empty.

The others hoarded things. Or maybe *hoarded* wasn't the right word. Tim knew enough about dysfunction to know that hoarding was a real thing, like OCD or anxiety. He didn't think the others went that far. But they had things they treasured, things they clung to. They filled their rooms, softening their spaces like feathers in nests. Tim had been stunned the first time he had really looked at Jason's safe house, at how quickly the man had gathered and filled the space with little pieces of himself.

Tim didn't gather. He shed, sloughing possessions like snakeskin, like lives.

He did have a lot of stuff, technically. He just didn't care about most of it. The things he did care about, well, they weren't so easily shoved into a duffel. He was a Wayne now, nominally, but he had been a Drake first. That made him different than a Grayson or a Todd or a Cain. Or maybe he was different just because he was.

Tim's transition from his parents' home to the Manor had been incremental, a new toothbrush stacked atop an extra set of clothes stacked atop a forgotten book bag. Most of what he left behind had

been sold with the house or donated with his blessing. The move from the Manor to his apartment had been sudden, violent, with barely a breath between the yelling and the final slam of the front door.

Tim wanted it to be different this time. It was his choice to leave, like before, but he didn't want it to seem like he was running away. He wasn't running away, he told himself, just making a calculated choice. This time, he would do it right. Slow, steady, methodical.

There just wasn't much to pack.

Tim bit back a sigh as he pushed aside the stack of shirts for the third time. His duffel still lay open on the bed, slack and gaping as it waited open-mouthed for items that might never come. Alfred was gone, off grocery shopping or something, and Bruce wouldn't return until later that afternoon. Tim had plenty of time, but instead of making decisions, he kept turning in circles, drifting from open drawer to parted closet to desk cubby and back again to the bed.

It wasn't as if he had been thorough before. The majority of his belongings had stayed behind, untouched except for some tidying from Alfred. The first time, in that reckless flight out of the Maor, he had thought to cram a few sets of clothes into his backpack, just enough, with ample rewearing, to get him through a couple weeks. He had left everything else—shoes, toothbrush, deodorant, schoolwork. Everything else except a framed photo from his bedside of Tim and Bruce and Dick standing side by side on the front steps of the Manor. It had been Tim's first Easter in his new home. Alfred had insisted they attend service, and they had dressed to please him, in carefully pressed slacks and dress shirts that matched their socks, ensembles that the old butler had picked out himself. The photo itself was awkward. None were smiling, though all three tried with various levels of failure. They looked uncomfortable in their starched collars, caught in the direct stare of the camera lens. The print had appeared, unannounced and already framed, one afternoon a few weeks later when Tim returned from school. He had loved it immediately.

Even as angry as he had been, the photo had come with him. It was still in his bag at his apartment, in the back of the closet, where no one but Tim would know. He was the only one who needed to know, needed to remember that his time as a Wayne had been real. That once he had stood between his heroes, Batman's hand warm and firm on his shoulder. That he had meant something once, and that there was still someone out there who needed to be found.

Tim wasn't sure what he would do with the photo now. Keep it still, probably, though Bruce was safe and home at last. He still needed the memory of what had been, the way he would need the memory of his final days recovering in the Manor.

That thought was enough to jar him free of his rusting indecision. Tim knelt, one hand pressed protectively to his side, and noted with distant satisfaction that his head didn't swim as he bent and reached beneath his bed. His fingers felt around until they brushed against soft fabric. Tim pulled the sweatshirt out and knocked it free of any dust before pressing it to his nose and breathing deeply. It still smelled like Bruce, like it had on the chilly evening when Tim had first borrowed it and spent the night with his fingers tucked into the long sleeves. The sweatshirt had fallen from bed to floor and then followed the tide of items that ebbed and flowed beneath the bed. Tim hadn't deliberately kept it, but neither had he been unaware of its location. A precaution, maybe, for the day he had known would come.

Maybe, Tim considered as he pressed the sweatshirt into his bag, he should box everything up. Make a clean break of it. He didn't see a way to return to the Manor again, not permanently. And if Dick's room were any indication, Bruce and Alfred would never do it themselves. And it would be too tempting to allow himself a reason to return. It would hurt too much to know that the window was left open, when it would never be safe for him to crawl back through.

But a thorough packing would take time, and though he had some, his supply was limited. It would be best for everyone if he were gone before the plane landed. Cass would need time to settle in, and, selfishly, Tim didn't want to see the look on Damian's face when he realized Tim had lost again. He didn't want to see the look on Bruce's face either.

So, in the end, Tim packed only his duffel bag and resigned the rest of the room to its fate. His concerns were utilitarian, focused on practical items that would keep him from dipping into his trust fund, and one or two more sentimental items that he couldn't bear to part with. Even still, the duffel sagged in the middle as he slung the strap across his chest.

There just wasn't much to pack.

He didn't hesitate on the threshold. Hesitations hurt, like holding onto a match as it burned down to the tip. Best to let go quickly, before the pain hit. Tim adjusted the bag, careful to keep the press of it against

his good hip as he reached back and pulled the door shut behind him.

Next steps would be important, going forward. Not thinking ahead had been his downfall before. Bruce might not believe it, but Tim didn't want to return to the way he had been. That Tim, the one who had let himself fall and fall and fall, he scared Tim, when he let himself think about it. Tim had done a good deal of *not* thinking at the Manor, truth be told, but he knew he needed to now. If he left now and something happened, Bruce would blame himself forever. Tim knew he would.

So, next steps. Small steps. Practical steps. Packing had been a practical thing, making sure he took enough to show that he was planning for himself, for his future. He wasn't starting from nothing. Dinah had stressed that in their sessions, and it was true. He had his apartment. He had his legal independence. He had Red Robin.

It wasn't nothing. It just felt like it.

As there had been no hesitation outside his room, there was no hesitation as Tim walked down the stairs and toward the front hall. He didn't have to walk slowly to try to remember the details of the Manor. He would never forget this place, not one inch of it. The only place his feet did slow was in the foyer, where the bronze lion sat, guarding the door. Tim cupped his hand over the statue's nose and rubbed the bright spot where the faithful beast had been pet thousands of times before. He wasn't sure how the tradition started, with what generation of Wayne, but it had always made him feel good, to layer the ghost of his touch atop theirs.

"Master Timothy?"

Tim stiffened, then forced his muscles to relax again as he turned to face Alfred. He could already feel the smile on his face, the small, relaxed, utterly fake one that he kept pressed and ready like a pocket square. It had served him well, that smile. Too well. It came too easily and was too quick to be believed.

The old butler stood at the other end of the hall. He must have come in several minutes prior without Tim hearing, because his going-out hat and windbreaker, the ones Tim had watched him put on earlier, were nowhere to be seen. His gaze flicked from Tim's face to the duffel and back again, taking it all in with keen efficiency.

"Yes, Alfred?" Tim prompted. He fought to stand steady and not shift his weight. No tells. He couldn't afford a single tell, not a flinch, not a

blink.

“I need a hand in the kitchen,” was all Alfred said before turning on heel and disappearing through the doorway.

Weird.

Tim stayed where he was, brow furrowed intently as he stared down the corridor, and weighed the relative risks of slipping out while he still could.

He was too curious for his own good.

There were bags on the kitchen island, reusable cloth and disposable paper. Alfred stood on the other side of the counter, fingers nimbly rolling up the cuffs of his sleeves.

“The meat can go in the refrigerator, produce in the bottom drawer except for the lemons, and bread in the bread box.”

Tim hesitated, but Alfred didn’t seem to notice, except to point his chin at the bags and turn away to reach for a drawer. Unsure what else to do, Tim lowered the duffel to the tiled kitchen floor and began unpacking the groceries. He slid glances Alfred’s way as he transferred the foodstuffs to their dictated spots, not wholly sure he was imagining the man’s distracted air, but not wholly sure he wasn’t either. Alfred had always been a cypher, one Tim had some practice at decrypting, but… Well, it had been a while. A long while. And with Alfred, sometimes it was less about the clues than about the vibe. About what was missing. About what was different. Such as obliquely demanding help rather than requesting. Such as involving Tim in a chore normally done alone.

The duffel remained where he had placed it, a dull blue shadow in the corner of Tim’s vision as he passed from grocery sacks to fridge and back again. Finish the unloading, grab the bag, and slip away. He didn’t have time to solve this mystery. One act of service to a loved one, and then he was gone.

“Alfred?” Tim waited, a small orange jar held aloft. Alfred turned to look. His face flickered, an expression Tim could barely catch, let alone decipher, passing across before Alfred pointed toward the pantry.

“Left side, third shelf.”

Tim ducked away obediently and weighed his options as he went. *Alfred, I think I'm going to… It's been a few weeks now, so I better… Look, we both know Damian will be back tonight and…* Or maybe he could just go. Pick up the bag, not make eye contact, and go.

No. Tim was a coward and a shirk, but he wasn't rude, and he knew his debts. He owed Alfred more than that.

"Well," Tim began, clearing his throat as he left the pantry, "I'm going to head—"

"Come wash your hands," Alfred interrupted. When Tim didn't move, he glanced up, gaze sharp. "Don't dawdle now."

Not knowing what else to do, Tim did as he was told. As he stood at the sink, Alfred stood to his left, wiping the counter with a wet rag and short, brisk strokes. It was, Tim realized, the first time they had been alone together since Tim left. Though Tim had been back in the Manor for days and days, he had spent those days by Bruce's side, and though Alfred had been around, he had seemed content to leave Tim and Bruce to each other's company. Tim wondered, suddenly, how Alfred was handling everything—Bruce's resurrection, Dick and Damian leaving, Tim's return—and then felt ashamed that he hadn't wondered before.

"Hands washed?" When Tim lifted his scrubbed fingers up for inspection, Alfred nodded briskly, then gestured toward the wooden board he had placed on the glistening countertop and the small pile of green that lay on top. "Chop that up, please."

"Alfred?" Tim asked slowly. "What are we doing?"

"Preparing dinner," was the answer, and nothing more.

That made Tim pause. Tim had spent many hours in this kitchen, legs curled beneath him on a barstool as he fought his way through homework and let the sound of Alfred's radio curl around him. In those days, before Bruce had really accepted him or even acknowledged his existence, Alfred had been his one companion. The old butler had let Tim prattle away about anything and everything and had even offered a story or two of his own. Tim had felt safe here.

But he had never been allowed to cook. He had offered. Multiple times. At first because it seemed polite and he'd wanted to help—it was rude to sit and watch someone else do all the work, right? And then it had been because he had wanted to learn. Cooking seemed like

a good and useful thing to know, but more specifically, he had wanted to learn from *Alfred*. He had wanted a reason to stand hip to hip (or hip to thigh; Tim had never been overly tall) and listen intently as Alfred walked him through each step. He had imagined he would show immediate talent, and Alfred would praise his skill and rest a warm hand atop his head.

Every time he had offered, Alfred had pretended not to hear or, if pushed, had brushed away the offer and given Tim a task that sent him from the room. Eventually, Tim had stopped asking.

Alfred wasn't looking at him now, but he rapped a knuckle on the cutting board. "Finely chopped, if you please. And when you've finished, the chillies there to your right next."

The duffel was still by the door, a reminder that he was meant to go. Tim couldn't see it, the counter blocked his view, but he could feel it waiting, like he could feel the tick of the clock that pulled Bruce's plane across the ocean. But it had been months since he had been with Alfred, a lifetime since they had really spoken. Bruce hadn't been the only one Tim had missed.

The chopping was a little weird. Tim was not unfamiliar with knives. He knew them as weapons, of course, and had been known to slice an apple or two. He couldn't say he had ever chopped up… what was this, an herb? So he approached the task delicately, trying to remember how the chef had placed his fingers in the half episode of the one cooking show he'd seen.

As he worked, Tim stole glances at Alfred, but Alfred's attention remained fixed on the mixing bowl that he stirred with a stern sort of fervor. This moment was one of a kind; Alfred, for reasons unknown, had finally allowed Tim to help, and it seemed unlikely that Tim would ever be able to stand hip to hip in this kitchen with the man he thought of like a grandfather ever again. The awareness weighed Tim down like lead in his marrow. He should say something, shouldn't he? Ask a question? Start a conversation? Do *something* to etch this memory into his brain?

Every word died brittle and unspoken in his mouth until Tim at last choked out, "So Bruce found Cass, huh?"

Bruce himself had said so last night, texting Tim an update that made Tim's phone screen light up the ceiling and kept him staring up at that ceiling long after it had gone dark and still. He hadn't mentioned it to

Alfred, but he assumed Alfred knew.

Alfred sucked in a breath as if drawing himself up from a deep well of thought.

“Yes,” he replied, “Miss Cassandra has been located.”

“And she’s alright?” Tim said, repeating another question he had already asked Bruce.

“Yes, thank the Lord.” Alfred reached over and scooped away the chopped greens, replacing them with a handful of chilies. “It seems she had reverted to living on the streets. Half-starved and utterly filthy, poor thing. She’ll have a washdown on the jet and then another good scrub once she’s home.”

Good for Cass. Really, good for her, that Bruce had found her and coaxed her back. Tim didn’t know her all that well, hadn’t had the chance to really get to know her before everything fell apart, but she seemed alright. Actually, she had seemed completely terrifying, but despite her history, Cassandra Cain was the only one of all of them whose moral backbone had seemed as unyielding as Bruce’s. And she had loved Bruce, wholly and absolutely, which meant Tim couldn’t help but love her, too, at least in an abstract sense.

He should have noticed when she left. Even with his entire world falling apart, he should have noticed.

“And you’re happy she’s coming back?” Tim asked, his focus more on his hands and the careful chopping of the chillies than the words coming from his mouth, but his attention quickly rerouted at the emphatic “*Yes*, of course” from Alfred.

Alfred was frowning now, and Tim didn’t know why. Because he had been rude to ask? Because Alfred *wasn’t* actually happy Cass was coming back? Because . . . because he was happy about Cass but not about Damian? Or not about Tim?

What was he still doing here?

Tim set down the knife. “I should get going.”

“Master Timothy,” Alfred burst out, the words still clear and clipped, but hurried, a metaphorical hand on his wrist.

Tim paused in turning away, but kept his eyes on the floor.

Alfred hesitated—and Alfred never hesitated—making Tim's stomach twist with dread.

"You were ill," Alfred began, then hesitated again. The words came slowly, picking their way through with tentative steps, like careful feet through a mindfield. It reminded Tim of Bruce, and he held his breath. "You were… very ill. And before that, it seems, you were grievously injured. Is there a reason I was not seen as a reliable source of aid?"

Oh.

Oh no.

Alfred could be inscrutable, unreadable, even stoic, but there was no missing the note of hurt in his voice. Tim turned around, twisted stomach double knotting as he did.

If Dick had asked, Tim's bitterness would have tempted him to be honest to the point of spite. If Bruce, Tim would have lied. But Alfred?

"I'm sorry," Tim murmured.

"That is not an answer," Alfred replied, gentleness still not overruling firmness.

He couldn't do this. He wouldn't. Not to Alfred. Not with Bruce on his way back with Damian in tow. What good would it do, now, to hurt Alfred, to hurt himself? Because it did hurt, remembering those awful, lonely months. Remembering how it had felt to leave and not be followed. Remembering the dark, miserable days leading up to his departure.

This was a mistake. He shouldn't have wasted time upstairs, shouldn't have gotten caught, shouldn't have followed Alfred back to the kitchen. Tim mumbled another apology, then rounded the island and bent to snatch up the duffel.

"Was I not worthy of your trust?" Alfred asked. His voice didn't shake, but it shone like iron. "Or were you that determined to die?"

Tim stiffened.

Dinah had pointed out in one of their sessions that Tim tended toward the *flight* end of fight or flight, but that he had the propensity to lash out when cornered. A defense mechanism, she called it, one born of self-preservation. Tim had argued with her about it, but only on

principle. He knew she was right. He was private, intensely so. He didn't like to open up. He didn't like to be hurt. And he hated feeling trapped. So he would strike, quickly and venomously, like a snake doubling on itself to bite the hand that grasped its tail.

He was trying to be better. He was trying.

But he was hurting, still, even after all this time in the Manor and its days of idyllic peace. Because he remembered it all, and he wondered why he hadn't been enough.

"Why did you not come to me for help?" Alfred pressed, and the pressure broke Tim.

"You chose Damian."

"I chose no one, child. Certainly no one over you."

"You did. You chose him over me." Tim released the bag and pivoted to face Alfred once more. His eyes were burning, not with tears but the dry, empty heat that came when the tears were spent and the wishing was wasted and still nothing had changed.

"He came in and you let him do whatever he wanted. Dick took Robin and gave it to him, and you let him."

"You know I do not—" Alfred protested, but Tim kept going.

"Him or me. That's what I said. And Dick picked him. And you let him."

Tim had left, and Alfred hadn't stopped him. And even then, Tim had hoped, maybe, once the dust settled, Alfred would think differently, would come for him and beg him to come home. And Tim would've said no, because Bruce was still lost and Damian was still there, but it would have mattered, because it would have meant that Alfred fought for him.

Before this year, Tim had never doubted his place with Alfred. Bruce had been the hard sell in the beginning. His bitterness and grief over losing Jason meant he hadn't been shy about holding Tim at arm's length. Even once their relationship had changed, Tim had always worked just a little harder to make sure Bruce wouldn't change his mind and turn Tim away. But Alfred had been welcoming from the start. Tim would never be first with either of them, because he hadn't *been* first, but he had never doubted that Alfred wanted him around

and even loved him. Had never doubted, until Bruce died.

“You didn’t come for me. Not even once. It felt like, after I walked out that door, that I was dead, too.”

Alfred had turned pale and gray as ice. Tim ground the heel of his hand into his eye and fought against the lump rising in his throat. He hadn’t wanted this. He didn’t want to hurt Alfred, not ever. But it still hurt him so *much*.

“I have . . . done you a great disservice.” Alfred sounded old, older than he ever had before, despite his graying head and liver-spotted hands. “All of you, it seems, if you would believe that I care so little for you.”

He sat down heavily at the kitchen table, as if his strings were cut, and Tim couldn’t leave.

“Alfred...”Tim crossed and squatted down in front of the chair. “It’s not that you don’t care.” He didn’t believe that. He couldn’t. “It’s just… I know I’m not first. And I thought I was okay with that, but I-I...”

Alfred’s face contorted. “You children and your rankings. There is no first, no second, no last.” He reached out and cupped Tim’s face gently. His skin was soft and warm and thin against Tim’s cheek, like tissue paper.

“I love each of you to the fullest,” Alfred said, tone as soft and restrained as his hands, but his voice resonated deep and full in Tim’s chest. “No one more or less than the other, but as much as my heart knows to give. You . . . you are my family and my soul, and it grieves me to see any of you unhappy or in pain.”

Really? Tim wanted to ask. He didn’t, but the doubtful hope must have been written all over his face, because Alfred’s expression fractured, crumpling in on itself.

“Then why?” Tim whispered. He had never learned to leave a question unanswered, and he needed to know. Why, if he was loved, if he was cherished, did Alfred let him go?

The fracture spread further, cracking and breaking like old ice. The wrinkles in the corners of Alfred’s face deepened with sorrow and regret and other emotions Tim couldn’t reliably name. His eyes traced Tim’s upturned face, and then one firm thumb swiped at the tear that

had begun to trickle down Tim's cheek.

"Because I am a fool and a coward and selfish to my core," Alfred admitted hoarsely. "An utter fool, but, with hope, one who learns from his mistakes. Will you forgive me, my boy, for what I have done, and for what I have not?"

Forgiveness wouldn't erase the hurt. It would linger with him like a stone bruise, invisible but felt when he pressed upon it. But Tim would give his forgiveness freely, again and again, if it meant having Alfred back. He had been trying to on his own, but to be asked, to have his trauma acknowledged, it felt like he could breathe just a little freer.

"Yes," Tim breathed. He lunged forward and in an instant was wrapped into a hug, his face smashed into Alfred's lapel. "Of course."

He didn't need to understand. He just needed to know he was safe.

"You never should have left," Alfred murmured into Tim's hair. His mustache tickled, whiskers scraping against Tim's forehead as he left a solemn peck. "And you never will need to again."

Oh.

"Alfred, I can't stay. No, no, listen. Listen," Tim insisted, pulling back just enough to brace himself against Alfred's legs and look up into his face. "I'll be safe this time, I promise. I will. But Bruce is coming back, and Damian's with him, and…"

Tim faltered, breath leaving him in a stuttering rush before he forced himself onward. "I know Bruce, okay? Damian's awful, but he's Bruce's kid, and Bruce is going to remember that if he spends any time with him."

Like, say, a round-trip flight overseas.

Tim wrapped his hands around Alfred's and squeezed tightly. "He picked me. Just for a little bit, he picked me, because I needed him to. So now I can pick Bruce, because he'll need me to."

It was more than Damian. It was Damian and it was Dick and it was the cowl and the legacy of Batman and Robin and so much more. It was Bruce, unwilling to let anyone go. Tim had seen it with Red Hood, and he was seeing it again now. Bruce didn't know how to let go, not really, and if he tried, a piece of him would die. Tim hadn't worked so

hard to bring Bruce back to life to let that happen.

For just a little while, Tim had allowed himself to be selfish. But now it was time to grow up. If Bruce wouldn't let go, then Tim would for him. Just knowing Bruce had been willing to try would be enough.

But now it was Alfred gripping him, fingers wrapped around his elbows. "No."

"Alfred—"

"No," Alfred repeated, as calm and unshakable as bedrock. "Whatever must be decided, it will be done here, together. No running. No sides. Together, as a family."

It wouldn't be that simple. It couldn't be, not after all that had happened.

But, Tim realized slowly, Alfred wasn't promising easy simplicity. He was promising merely that it would be *done*, to whatever end, and that he would stand by Tim through it all. And that was not nothing. Not to Tim.

"Okay," Tim whispered, then dared to lean forward and press his face into Alfred's jacket again. "Okay."

They stayed like that a little longer, Alfred's jacket soaking up Tim's tears and his arms wrapped across Tim's back. Alfred smelled like cloves and fresh detergent, and Tim would have stayed until his knees ached from the tiled floor, but at last, they pulled apart and stood to face each other.

Alfred reached out and once more swiped a thumb across Tim's cheek, then gave him a small, affectionate pat.

"Dinner has gotten a mite off schedule, I'm afraid. Come help me finish, and then you can go upstairs and put away your things."

Tim grinned, wobbly but true. "Yes, sir."

Good thing there wasn't much to unpack.

Chapter End Notes

Want to know a secret? Here's the truth of why Alfred let Tim leave to begin with.

Because Alfred's son was dead. His heart was broken beyond repair. But instead of allowing him to grieve, one little boy kept insisting that no, Bruce was alive, why are you sad, Bruce is ALIVE, just you wait and see.

As Alfred said, he was foolish and selfish and, ultimately, wrong. But it was never about Tim.

Chapter 14: Dick

Chapter Summary

> *Dick leaned against the chain-link fence and watched as another passenger plane crossed overhead, body winking in the sunlight. The people above, if they looked down at all, wouldn't think much of the scattering of buildings or the two runways that bordered them. They would be looking onward, to where The Arch waited, or further still, to where Gotham crouched on the horizon.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Archie Goodwin International Airport, like the city it was in, never slept. It was also absolute garbage. The Arch, as it was known, was outdated, dirty, sprawling, inefficiently arranged, and constantly under construction. It was a liminal space, where one could enter expecting to pick up a visitor, a ten-minute stop at most, only to emerge hours later, disoriented, squinting at the streetlights, and smelling faintly of sweaty socks and cheap pizza. Gothamites hated it, but were also perversely proud of its inhospitality. Its rankings on the World's Worst Airports lists were widely touted. Anything less than a #1 just wasn't good enough. Gotham, in its own mind, was the best at everything, even at being the worst.

Dick had visited The Arch only once, to greet Barbara when she returned from a summer abroad. He had been nervous—seventeen, awkward, not sure how it would feel to see her after five months apart, afraid she'd come home with some suave European on her arm. The Arch had only enhanced his misery. There'd been a plumbing leak earlier in the day, and the dirty patterned carpet had squelched beneath his feet. Other than that one visit, he only knew of The Arch as a sprawling grey behemoth in the distance, vast, empty land in a city where real estate was sparse. It dizzied him, when he allowed himself to think about it. His family had been too poor to fly, to travel any way except by the roll of the circus caravan. And then he'd gotten a different family, and they had been too rich to fly, at least out of The Arch.

Dick leaned against the chain-link fence and watched as another passenger plane crossed overhead, body winking in the sunlight. The people above, if they looked down at all, wouldn't think much of the

scattering of buildings or the two runways that bordered them. They would be looking onward, to where The Arch waited, or further still, to where Gotham crouched on the horizon.

The space, officially, was the Cana Airport, a private airport west of The Arch. It wasn't known in Gotham. The airfield wasn't hidden by geography, but by infrastructure and by money. No one came to the Cana Airport except for the filthy rich and those who worked for them. The Waynes had leased a berth there for decades. To Dick, the Cana Airport was just the airport, the only airport worth mentioning in his world. It was clean and empty and perpetually new. Having money meant no lines, no waiting, having the way paved smooth and hassle-free. Nothing in his life had felt smooth this year. He would take the little fortunes where he could.

Dick brought his attention back to the field in front of him as a throat cleared to his right.

"Alright then."

Dick pushed off, charming billionaire's son's smile spread over his face like a shield. "Thanks, Rodney."

He flicked a salute at the security guard, then shoved his hands into his pockets as he crossed the grass to the tarmac. The plane—small, sleek, and emblazoned with a silver *W*—was still cycling down, its wheels stopped but its engines humming with power. He avoided them, stopping well away from the plane itself, but the wind tousled his hair. He looked like a character in a movie, casual ease in the way he planted his feet, the looseness of his hands, the way his parted collar flapped against his neck. Dick knew this, saw himself from outside the way other people did. He had a different relationship with appearances than Bruce did, but they both could pull the same trick. They had to. Their lives hinged on appearances in a way the others would only learn in time. It would make his life easier once they did, but, perversely, Dick hoped they never fully would.

He wished the ease were real. That his stomach didn't feel like a beached fish, flopping and writhing for escape. Nerves before a performance, before a fight, those were familiar, welcome. They made him sharper, better. These just made him want to run. To distract himself, Dick ran mental wagers—who would step out first, second, third; what they would be wearing; if anyone would smile. Little things. He couldn't predict how this meeting would go. If he could, he wouldn't be fighting against the urge to tense his calves and ready

himself to run.

The door in the side of the craft opened and the ramp lowered. No one emerged. Dick waited. A hooded head appeared, face pale amid the folds of the dark blue fabric. Dick recognized the spare set of the clothes Bruce kept on the plane, and the body they sheltered. He had last seen Cassandra Cain on a rooftop in Hong Kong. After she had disappeared from Gotham, running as the rest of them attended Bruce's service, he had tracked her down. It had been difficult, but not difficult enough, which had given him hope that this, at least, was something he could do right. That she had meant for him to come and take her back to Gotham. What he would do with her, this half-feral assassin child, he hadn't known. But Bruce had loved her, and that had meant something to Dick.

So he had tracked her, found her, cornered her, and offered to bring her back. Even then, mere weeks after she had left, he had been shocked at the change. She had been wholly feral when Bruce first found her, a street child living on garbage and instincts, all rags and bones. Time in the Manor had softened her some, but the change was only temporary. She had retained her language at least, stark refusals in her hands thrown at him like knives. No, she wouldn't return. No, she didn't want them. Yes, if he tried to follow her again, she would kill him. There had been no rage in that last reply, just cold intent. Dick had returned to Gotham, another failure draped over his shoulders.

And now here they were again. She looked thinner, to the point of gauntness, though some of that could be Bruce's monstrous hoodie and rolled up sweatpants swallowing her whole. Clark had told him very little when he had called, but his hesitations and ellipses had been enough for Dick to imagine the rest—the hunger, the filth, the scrabble to survive.

Cassandra descended the ramp and stopped at the bottom, waiting for the others to emerge. Dick stayed where he was. A white stick bobbed in the corner of Cass's mouth, a lollipop that she pulled free with a smack of green-dyed lips. Granny apple, some portion of his mind supplied, laying supposition over sourceless knowledge of Cass's taste for sour things.

She eyed him impassively. Dick was suddenly, uncomfortably aware of every part of himself and what he might be saying without intent. Could she see his discomfort? His weariness? His anger? His hurt? Could she see his uncertainty at her return? Or how much he worried

for Damian? How much he missed Bruce? Or maybe he was better than he thought. Maybe all she saw was a man, hands in his pockets and the wind in his hair.

Cass stuck the lollipop back in her mouth and looked up the ramp to the open door as the doorway filled with Bruce. Despite the long flight, Bruce seemed as alert and ready as ever. Only the family could say they had ever seen him truly dressed down, but his attire for the plane—a pressed chinos and open-collar linen shirt pairing that cost as much as the average Gothamite's monthly rent—was as relaxed as the outside world would ever see. Even if, for the moment, the outside world only included Rodney back at the gate.

It drove the air from Dick's lungs to see him, the way it had each and every time since Bruce's return. Perhaps it was melodramatic to think himself an orphan as an adult, but despite the decade-plus separating the events, watching Bruce seemingly die in a fiery explosion felt no different than watching his parents plunge to their deaths. For six months Dick had lived with a raw hollow in his chest where his heart should have been, and he had only just begun to wallpaper over the damage. Only it hadn't been a hole at all, but a blade shoved so deep into him that every time he saw Bruce again, alive and here, it felt like someone wrapped their hands around the hilt and gave a tug. He was still learning to breathe around it, to hold on until the day that it was pulled out completely.

All of that—the death, the loss, the unexpected gain—would be sorted out in time, but what about what had happened since?

Bruce descended the stairs and Dick wished suddenly, with a ferocity that he hadn't felt since middle school, that Alfred had come, too. He and Bruce had already been circling each other warily since the blowup in the Cave, each trying to find sure footing on suddenly shaky ground. And then Bruce had gotten a call and torn out of the house with a speed that usually meant the world was ending. Only later had Dick learned of the rush to the clinic, and the revelations to follow. That had been weeks ago, the Manor doors closed to him ever since.

It would heal over, Dick had told himself. It always did. They had had bellringer fights before, and it had always turned out alright in the end. But the unresolved tension ached like a stone bruise, deep and lingering and unhealed. And the longer the separation, the more Dick worried that maybe, just maybe, this time was different.

It would have helped if Bruce had looked as uncertain as Dick felt, that Dick could have some reassurance that they were still partners, if only in their doubts. But Bruce looked like he always did, unreadable and unflappable, his gaze calm and unhurried as it passed over the field, extending a nod in Rodney's direction before resting on Dick. Dick, for his part, waited with his hands in his pockets and deliberately fought to keep from shifting his weight.

He didn't know what he would say past hello, what Bruce might say. Bruce's lips parted, but Dick's attention was caught by movement behind him. In the dark opening in the side of the charter, another head poked through. Dick's heart twisted, an almost physical sensation of catching and squeezing in his chest. When Damian had disappeared, he had panicked, not sure if the boy had run away or been taken. No matter the answer, it would be Dick's fault. Even once Bruce had called, said Damian was with him and safe, some part of Dick had doubted.

But there he was, alive, intact, a red line down his cheek, likely from being smushed against the window in sleep. As Dick watched, Damian pushed his hair off his forehead and looked across the tarmac. His gaze swept across the field, over the strip of asphalt, and never stuttered as it passed over Dick.

Dick murmured something to Bruce—he forgot what the moment it passed his lips—and stepped past to hurry toward the plane.

"Damian!"

Dick reached the stairs as Damian descended from the last step. It had only been two days, a mere handful of hours, but Dick felt as if he had aged a decade.

"Damian," Dick said again, and Damian lifted his chin.

"Grayson."

The ground tilted slightly, warping with a sense of deja vu at the chilliness in Damian's tone. There was no warmth, no familiarity, as if they were two strangers sitting graveside once more. This, at least, Dick knew well. This he could deal with.

Dick bent to one knee on the tarmac so that he was level with Damian. Though they were eye to eye, Damian's gaze was focused on a point past Dick's shoulder. Dick didn't mind, not yet, because it meant he could stare unabashedly at this little boy who wasn't lost,

wasn't kidnapped, wasn't hurt, wasn't dead.

Only their many months together kept Dick from sweeping the boy into a hug on the spot. Instead, he cleared his throat to push down the lump and said quietly, "You scared me to bits, you know. I thought Talia had gotten you, or Ra's, or a rogue."

Damian, already stiff and stony, had gone rigid at the mention of his mother and grandfather. He still wouldn't look at Dick.

"Hey." Dick reached up and grabbed Damian's shoulders, keeping his touch feather soft to leave him the ease to pull away if he wanted. "I know you're angry with me. I don't know why—" He nodded as Damian's head jerked in surprise. "Bruce wouldn't tell me. He thought we should talk about it, just us. But whatever it is, we'll work through it here, in Gotham, together, alright? Don't go running off and leaving me behind."

Damian's jaw worked as he glanced at Dick and then away just as quickly. "I apologize for causing alarm," he said at last.

Alarm. As if Dick hadn't spent every minute on the verge of vomiting. But that was the past, and Dick knew better than to let his calm facade fall now.

"Oh, you'll be making up for it," Dick assured him cheerfully. "Extra patrol with yours truly, then a Looney Tunes marathon. No critiquing the physics, just pure yuks for a solid hour."

"At the Penthouse?"

That bright flare of anger lit up Dick's chest, and he ruthlessly smothered it back down to embers. He could feel Bruce and Cass carefully not listening. "That's not my call. But the Penthouse is where the double fudge ice cream is, so that's a bonus, right?"

Damian only clucked his tongue, and Dick bit back a sigh as he pushed himself back onto his feet. "Oh but hey," he added once he was standing upright, "I wasn't the only one who missed you."

Grinning, Dick lowered the zipper of his windbreaker and carefully pulled out the kitten that had been sleeping soundly. It mewed softly as Dick held it out.

"My kitten," Damian breathed, and the look on his face as he cupped the purring mass to his cheek was worth ten times over the discomfort

of the trip.

The kitten had been an impulse decision initially, a stray they had found on patrol one night. Dick, like countless other desperate caretakers before him, had been unable to resist the possibility of bribing his way into Damian's affection, and equally unable to ignore his Robin's clear yearning. The kitten itself was a lot like Damian—not wholly a baby but partly grown, with awkward, gangly legs, a round belly, and a skittish distrust that made it prickly even on good days. Realizing Damian had left it behind had scared Dick more than anything else, and seeing it back in his arms again helped loosen the knot in Dick's chest one loop more.

On impulse, Dick leaned forward and placed a quick peck on Damian's forehead, ignoring his quick jerk of surprise. "Come on. I brought the car."

Damian adjusted the cat in his arms and followed. "Which car?"

"*The* car." Not the Batmobile, of course, but Damian's favorite—a sleek black coupe that went obscenely fast. When Dick had realized how much Damian enjoyed it, he had taken to keeping it at the Penthouse along with his more sedate, everyday car. Like the kitten, he had hoped the car would give him an edge today.

Damian clucked his tongue again, this time in approval, and Dick's lips twitched upward. Bruce and Cass waited for them at the gate, having swapped places with Rodney who now stepped forward to wave personnel toward the abandoned aircraft. Cass was leaning against Bruce, not out of any weariness as far as Dick could tell, but just because she could. Dick understood, and he envied her for it.

"Well," Dick said when it was clear that someone needed to say something.

Ask us to come back. Tell us we're welcome home again.

But Bruce wouldn't, and Dick knew why. The man at least had the decency to look uncomfortable at last. Bruce looked from Dick to Damian, and something shifted in his face. After nudging Cass to straighten, he knelt with a grunt as his knees cracked and popped, catching Damian's gaze the way Dick had just moments prior.

"So this is the kitten," Bruce said, and Dick bit back a retort. They *had* lived under the same roof for weeks, after all. But it wasn't the place, wasn't the time, and there was something in the way Bruce and

Damian were watching each other. Something that was outside his scope of understanding.

“Beautiful,” Bruce said, running the back of one finger down the animal’s spine. “And worth the work.”

Damian’s forehead furrowed and he gave one slow, thoughtful nod.

That was enough. Whatever newfound connection the two of them had forged, Dick was glad, but he didn’t want to look at it right now. Dick was the one who understood Damian, who connected with him, who had put in the time. This was what Dick had wanted from Bruce, but right now, Dick wanted to retreat to the Penthouse with his Robin and shut out the world for a while.

“Come on, Dames, let’s get going,” Dick called as he stepped around Bruce and toward the small parking lot beyond the gate.

“Dick,” Bruce began.

“Cass, welcome back. Rodney, good to see you again.” Damian fell in step and Dick kept a guiding hand on his shoulder all the way to the car. He didn’t look back.

Patrol went better than expected. Damian had slept on the plane, and Dick had made him rest again when they reached the Penthouse, so jetlag wasn’t a major concern. Damian was still standoffish, whatever issue there was between them still causing some distance. But it felt good to be out there again, his Robin by his side. It felt good to know, no matter the dangers of patrol, that they were together, and that side by side they were safer than they would ever be apart.

Just as threatened, Dick kept them out longer than normal, taking advantage of the lull in the deepest part of the night to find an outpost to just… sit. To be. It wasn’t always something he was good at, but he had learned, growing up next to Bruce. It felt like a treasure, an honor, now to sit next to his Robin and to look out over the city they served together.

Despite the rest, the long night meant Damian was asleep on his feet by the time they returned to the Penthouse. Dick guided him to bed, then returned to his own room, fully prepared to tumble face first into a deep and dreamless sleep. Only it never came.

Dick stared at his ceiling as the minutes turned into one hour, then

two. He was tired. He was tired body, mind, and spirit, but he couldn't sleep. At first he thought about sleeping. And then he thought about thinking about sleeping. He thought about his day. He thought about seeing Damian step off the plane and the look on his face when the kitten appeared. He thought about Cass, what she must have gone through, how she might feel being back in the four walls of the Manor again. He thought about—and then quickly shied away from—Tim. And again and again and again, his thoughts circled around Bruce. Around their fight. Around the phone call that barred them from the Manor. Dick couldn't think on any of these things for too long without flinching and looking away, like staring into the sun, but he also couldn't stay away.

And then he wasn't *here* anymore. He was *there*, in the *then*, just a teenager lying in the dark after a fight with his brother-dad-Batman-Bruce, stomach churning with acid and fire, so certain he was right and so scared he was wrong. Only this time he *knew* he was wrong, just like he knew he was right, because he was an adult now (sort of), and he knew it was possible to be both at once. What he didn't know was how to admit it this time, not in any way that would make it better for him or for Bruce or for Tim or for Damian. Especially not Damian. And that had to be his priority, right? Because Damian was his Robin, that had to be his priority. Only… Bruce was back, so maybe Damian wouldn't be his Robin anymore. Or maybe he would, because there was still Tim, and who knew, maybe something would happen to Bruce again—

Maybe something would happen to Bruce again.

And suddenly Dick wasn't in his bed but on his feet, stumbling into sweatpants and shoes, because Bruce had *died*. Bruce had died and Dick had gone on without him and even once Bruce had come back, Dick had never fully shaken the fear that he would go away again, just as quickly, just as violently, just as unexpectedly. Only this time, instead of dinner at the Manor and relaxed patrol chatter, Dick's last memory would be turning his back on Bruce in an airfield and walking away.

And wouldn't that just be their universe's way, to take Bruce again, now, after that.

It was late, so late it was early, and Bruce would be asleep, but Dick didn't care. He wasn't allowed at the Manor, but he didn't care about that either. The door would be locked, but the window was faster, up, straight up the old trellis and crumbling brick into Bruce's room,

where he would see—where they could talk—and—

Dick jerked to a halt, the street door of the Penthouse still open behind him as he stood on the stoop and stared at Bruce Wayne.

“Do you have a moment?” Bruce asked after a short pause, as if he were standing outside Dick’s bedroom door at the Manor, not meeting in the street, both of them wild-haired and creased with weariness, in the fading gray of the night.

Dick, not knowing what else to do, nodded.

There was a decorative raised garden around the base of the building. The standard railing was deliberately left off, as sometimes the unhoused would use the garden beds as a place to rest—at least until the staff, under the explicit guidance of the building’s eccentric owner, could guide the sleeper into temporary quarters inside. There was no one resting amid the hydrangeas now, making the concrete ledge around the raised beds a suitable place to sit.

It felt like a dream. The pre-dawn workers were already starting to stir, their lights illuminating single windows in far-off buildings, like stars in the twilight. The streets themselves were still, quiet, empty. Bruce was in slacks and a collared shirt, but his hair was a mess. Dick’s eyes still felt gummy from lack of sleep, and his heart was still racing, but Bruce was… here? For some reason?

“Why are you awake?” Dick asked, instead.

“Jetlag,” was the answer. Then, with a grimace, “I couldn’t sleep,” as if those were two separate things. Maybe they were.

“I was coming to see you,” Dick admitted.

He could feel Bruce’s curiosity, like a pressure, though they both stared straight ahead or at their feet, anywhere but each other for more than a moment at a time. There were so many things he wanted to say. So many things he couldn’t say. So many things he didn’t know how to say that they felt like trash clogging up his throat.

“I don’t know what to do,” Dick finally rasped, because they weren’t an honest family, not with each other and not with themselves, but he could be, sometimes, with Bruce.

Bruce shifted next to him, a sort of settling, a way to indicate that he was listening, go on. Bruce’s language was a subtle one, too subtle.

There were too many ways to misinterpret it. But this one Dick knew.

“I told you. I told you that you wouldn’t like what I had done.” And suddenly Dick was angry, furious. Because he had warned Bruce as best he knew how, and still it had all fallen apart.

“You did,” Bruce agreed.

“Punish me, I get it, but not Damian, Bruce.” Dick’s hand clenched on his thigh to keep himself seated. “He’s just a kid and you ripped his home away.”

“I’m not punishing him. I’m not punishing either of you.”

He knew that, deep down. But he also knew how Damian saw it. He knew what it felt like.

“He’s just a kid. And the Manor was his home,” Dick repeated.

“The Manor was Tim’s home, too.” There was no condemnation there, but there was steel threaded beneath the words.

Dick rocketed to his feet. “I never made him leave! Never, Bruce, not once. I begged him to come *back* multiple times and he refused.”

Because Dick had taken away Robin. Because no one, not even his own family, would believe him when he said Bruce was still alive. They had tried—Dick had tried—to get him help, and Tim had refused. Because he had been right.

And that was the guilt that weighed Dick down like the world on his shoulders. Tim had been right, and Dick had abandoned him to handle it alone.

Not abandoned, part of his mind continued to argue. What he told Bruce was true. Dick had reached out again and again and again, and every time, Tim had rejected him. And yet…

Bruce was still watching him from the ledge, unmoving and patient as stone as Dick paced in front of him.

“I don’t know what to *do*,” and this time the confession broke in the middle.

Just tell me what to do. Maybe he would hate it. Maybe he would disagree and they would be worse off than before. But he didn’t know how to fix this, and if anyone could know, Bruce would.

Bruce was watching him, eyes soft and face drawn with weariness. Dick faced him fully, palms upturned, and waited.

“I don’t either.”

Dick sat down next to Bruce before his legs could give way. “What?”

“I don’t know either,” Bruce repeated quietly. “I don’t know what the solution is for any of us. What I did, it was what was needed right then in an emergency, and I don’t regret it—” a hand on Dick’s arm kept him still “—but it’s not sustainable.”

Bruce spread his hands, calloused palms up, an echo of Dick’s gesture a moment ago. “I don’t know what the answer is.”

Dick sagged. Was this the end, then? What hope was left for them?

“Dick,” Bruce said, “Look at me.”

Dick lifted his head slowly and stared through watering eyes. Bruce brushed a thumb across one cheek, then the other.

“Robin,” Bruce murmured, and the name, spoken outside of masks, outside of their time as brothers in arms, sent a thrill down Dick’s spine, “when has a missing answer ever stopped us before?”

Dick sniffed and shook his head. “Never.”

Never. They never quit, not until the case was closed, the answers found. Because they were Batman and Robin.

“Never,” Bruce repeated with a firm nod. “There is an answer. It won’t be perfect, probably, but it exists, and we’ll find it. I promise.”

Dick slumped over and buried his face in Bruce’s neck. “I missed you,” he whispered. “I missed you so much.”

Bruce’s arms were around him, as solid and warm and unyielding as when Dick was a boy. “Me too, chum. Me too.”

“I hate fighting with you,” Dick mumbled.

Bruce’s lips pressed warm against his scalp. “I think we’re getting better at it,” Bruce said drily. “More efficient.”

Dick choked out a wet snort. “We’ve had enough practice.”

But that was family, wasn't it. Bellringer fights and stone-bruise hurts and knowing that, no matter how long it took, the wounds would heal, not because of any magical mumbo jumbo, but because they were people who actively cared for each other and would work to *make* the hurt heal.

They stayed like that for a little while, two idiots hugging it out on a stone ledge as the city lethargically clawed its way back into consciousness. Dick was the one to pull away first, but only to drag a sleeve across his eyes and snort again as Bruce ruffled his hair.

"So we don't know what to do, but what do we do next?" he asked.

The corner of Bruce's mouth twisted. "I need time with Damian. And you need to talk to Tim."

Dick's stomach plummeted.

"Tomorrow," Bruce added. He didn't yawn, but the corners of his eyes crinkled like he was holding one in. "You need to sleep, and so do I."

"Today tomorrow or tomorrow tomorrow?" Dick asked. The washed grey sky was beginning to brighten beyond the skyscrapers.

"Punk," Bruce muttered. "Tomorrow tomorrow."

Dick stood, then held out his hand. Bruce waved him off and stood with a grunt. Dick did yawn then, the stress and length of the previous day finally settling on him.

"Tomorrow, then."

Chapter End Notes

> I sound like a broken record at this point, but this took wayyyyyy longer than anticipated. I had the first part already written (where I indulge in lambasting my hometown airport for a solid half a page, completely separate from the plot) and just... sort of forgot that actual plot had to happen next? And then made a shocked Pikachu face when I got to that part and it was hard.
>
> Oh well.

Chapter 15: Tim, for the last time

Chapter Summary

> *They met in the park. It wasn't a special park by any means, but its purposes were utilitarian: neutral ground, public space, no close eavesdroppers, and long benches where they could sit and speak without having to look at each other.*
>
> *They were a family of not-lookers. Tim wanted to blame Bruce for that, but they all did it, in their own way. Right now, Tim wanted to blame Bruce for a lot of things. It had been his idea, this meeting. Just Tim and Dick, on a bench, in the park, while Alfred waited with the car down the block.*

Chapter Notes

> Me, each time: Wow, it sure is hard making this specific pairing talk to each other!
>
> The next pairing: Fool, you thought.
>
> Family rivalry at its finest.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They met in the park. It wasn't a special park by any means, but its purposes were utilitarian: neutral ground, public space, no close eavesdroppers, and long benches where they could sit and speak without having to look at each other.

They were a family of not-lookers. Tim wanted to blame Bruce for that, but they all did it, in their own way. Right now, Tim wanted to blame Bruce for a lot of things. It had been his idea, this meeting. Just Tim and Dick, on a bench, in the park, while Alfred waited with the car down the block.

Alfred served two purposes—to transport Tim there and to make sure Tim wasn't confronted with Bruce's heartbreak should discussions fail. He had to think of them that way, discussions. It sounded more clinical, more rational, less fraught with all the uncomfortable feelings that twisted his guts into knots.

Tim tried to think positive thoughts as he walked toward the assigned meeting place. Dinah hadn't told him to—he would have left therapy

if she had—but it seemed like the thing to do. He did want this to go well, after all. He wanted to work things out. He just wasn't sure if he could. If they could. Tim wasn't much of a fixer, not like this.

He was the first to arrive. It was a relief to see the bench empty, rather than Dick there, waiting, watching him approach as Tim crossed the distance too broad to do anything across except eye each other silently. But just as quickly, the relief turned to irritation. This was important to Tim, so he was on time. So what about Dick?

Tim had just chosen an end, sat, and wiped sweaty palms on the thighs of his jeans, when Dick appeared, double fisting two plastic to-go cups.

"Hey. Hey, Tim. Sorry I'm late."

Six months, and Dick looked unchanged—handsome, windswept, graceful in every line, the golden boy Jason had always accused him of being. The timelessness of him was a comfort and a wound. Tim felt like the last few months had ripped him open. Why didn't Dick look the same?

Dick was still talking. "—and then I thought maybe I'd pick up a drink?" Dick's fingertips tapped along the cup in his left hand. The right hand extended the second cup to Tim. "Thought maybe you'd want one, too."

Tim hesitated, then accepted the radioactive-colored drink. "Thanks."

"Of course." Dick sat at the other end of the bench.

The conversation, already unsteady, fell flat on its face and died.

Tim considered what to say next. He considered standing up and leaving.

"How are you feeling?"

Of course Dick was the one to break the silence. And the question startled Tim enough that he nearly spoke his first thought. *Really uncomfortable and wishing I wasn't here, thanks for asking.* But Dick's gaze was on his side, on the place where his shirt hid the scar that had gotten him and Damian kicked out.

Tim had to work to leave his free hand on the bench and not shield his side. "Fine," he muttered.

Dick's expression never wavered. Tim could see it out of the corner of his eye, the way he kept his eyebrows slightly lifted and the corners of his mouth upturned, as if he were engaged and interested in everything you were saying. Tim had taken that face at… well, at face value, once upon a time. And maybe it was real. Maybe. But Tim couldn't help noticing how it never, ever wavered.

"And school? How's that going?"

You've got to be kidding me. Tim's own face had a fight to keep steady. *Nice, nice, be nice. For Alfred. For Bruce.* Instead of snapping, he looked down and glared at the condensation trickling down the side of his plastic cup. "Beats me. I dropped out."

Not officially. His name was probably in a file somewhere. When Bruce died, Alfred had gotten him time away, and then there'd been the fallout, and Tim just… never went back. It hadn't seemed important anymore.

"What?" Dick's voice peaked briefly, then quickly dropped again. "Does Bruce know? Does Alfred?"

Tim shrugged, but his stomach clenched. Like it was Dick's place to ask those questions anymore. "Dunno. It hasn't come up."

"Listen, Tim, I know I'm the last person to talk about higher education here, but I at least finished high school. Don't you think—"

"Do you really want to do this right now?" Tim snapped, fingers tensing around his cup.

Dick was silent.

"Sorry," Tim muttered, not sure that he was at all.

"No. No, you're right," Dick replied quietly. "I overstepped. My apologies."

Apologies and *I'm sorry* were two totally different things. *Nice, nice, nice, be nice.*

This sucked. The injustice of it all hit like a blow to the stomach, making Tim's muscles clench. This *sucked*. He was here. Dick was here. He couldn't remember the last time they had been in the same place at once. And sure, Tim had gone in with low expectations, but he had thought… An effort would be made, maybe? Not this… this

dead-fish silence.

Tim knocked his knuckles against the bench and pushed himself up. “Good talk.”

“Tim, wait.”

“For what, Dick?” Tim demanded, pivoting sharply on one heel. “For what? Six months not long enough?”

“What do you want from me?” They could have been awful words, a cruel challenge, but they were spoken softly instead. Dick hadn’t moved from the bench. His mask had slipped a little, just enough so that Tim could tell it *was* a mask, that calm, smiling face. The smile was gone; the calm remained, but only just.

Dick licked his lips and repeated himself. “What do you want, Tim? What else can I give you? I never wanted you to leave. I asked you to come back again and again. I said I was sorry. What else is there?”

Tim hissed, because it was either that or scream or cry. He’d cried enough over Dick Grayson. “You keep saying that. You didn’t want me to leave, but you didn’t stop me. You didn’t choose me. You chose *him*.”

This was their ride, the same horrible, twisting loop without end that they’d been tumbling down for the last six months. It had variations, sometimes, in how Dick would deny it, or if he would just jump straight into defending Damian again. Once, Dick had pointed out how much like Jason Tim had sounded. The irony had been too strong to ignore. It had led him into Hood’s orbit and he’d never fully pulled himself free again. Turned out being royally screwed by the same people did a lot to mend fences, even if Jason hadn’t known the background of Tim’s exile at the time.

Dick’s head was in his hands now, drink abandoned along with his broken mask. “I didn’t think you’d leave. I would have stopped you if I’d known.”

Tim laughed at that, a genuine laugh that ripped from his throat like lightning, bright and hot and sharp. “I don’t think you thought about me at all. Why wouldn’t I leave? You took the only thing I had left.”

And this was the low genius of Bruce, putting them in an open space where they would have to watch what they said. Where they would have to *think* before they said something they shouldn’t. Even then,

with the sharp sting of anger and betrayal biting his fingertips, thinking didn't stop the words from coming, just slowed them enough to mask their meaning from casual ears.

Dick lifted his head at that and stared. "The only thing you had left," he repeated. For a moment, there was nothing, just dull sadness, and then anger flickered across his face.

Tim didn't care. What, he was supposed to watch what he said now? He wasn't saying anything new, not really. Bruce was dead, Dick had abandoned him for Damian, and then he'd taken Robin. Of *course* Tim had nothing left.

But Dick looked angry, angrier than he had in months. Usually he looked hurt, or frustrated, or broken, or exasperated. But now, now he looked like the final pieces to some horrible puzzle box had finally snapped into place and the lid had lifted. And what lay inside enraged him.

"You're angry," Tim said, stupidly.

"I'm—" Dick began, but he was looking everywhere but Tim, and the color was creeping up his neck.

Tim didn't like anger. It made him feel small, both when he held it and when it was directed at him. It made him want to curl up tight, until he was hard as stone. But Jason Todd had been in Gotham for almost a year now, and Bruce had been dead for six months. And Tim had been practicing.

"What?" he challenged, though his voice was unsteady even in the growl. "What have I done now? None of this is my *fault*, Dick."

And didn't that feel like the first free breath he'd had in months, saying it out loud.

Huh, some detached piece of his brain noted. *Maybe therapy is working.* But Dick was on his feet, tension strung across his body, and he still wouldn't look at Tim.

"Look at me!" Tim demanded, even though it was the last thing he wanted. "Tell me how this is my fault."

"It's not!" Dick snapped, heat lashing like a whip. "It's mine, alright? I know. You think I don't know? I did my best, Tim. I did my best and it wasn't good enough."

He was pacing now, feet silent on the dirt path but body hunched like a cornered tiger.

“There isn’t a single day in the last six months where I haven’t been brutally aware of how badly I screwed up, okay?” Dick dragged a hand through his hair, gripping the strands tightly before letting go. “Bruce was gone and Alfred was… And every day people were *dying* and I thought any minute Ra’s or Talia might show up and try to take Damian back and throw him into a hole for the rest of his life and I couldn’t let them happen but I just, just wanted to wake up.”

There were tears in Dick’s eyes. Tim watched, horrified and fascinated. Dick had cried at the funeral, just a tear or two at the gravesite, his hand on Tim’s shoulder, and once more, on a dark and miserable night in Tim’s new apartment. But never again, not where Tim could see him.

“I needed to show Damian he belonged still. I needed to show the *League* that he belonged still, and that Gotham wouldn’t stand by if he were taken. And I needed to give him some, some kind of outlet so we wouldn’t all wake up with our throats slit,” Dick ended with a bitter laugh.

It was the harshest Tim had ever heard him speak of Damian, and for a moment it gave him a sour, satisfied thrill. But only for a moment. “So I was right,” he croaked. “You didn’t think about me at all.”

Dick’s face twisted as he shook his head. “No, I did. I thought, *Thank God I still have Tim.* I thought, my dad is dead and my life is over, but at least I have my brother. I thought, together, maybe we could make it work. Gotham, Damian, all of it. Turn him into a proper Wayne, a proper…” A proper Robin.

Another laugh, this one closer to a sob as Dick turned to face Tim fully now. “I guess I underestimated how badly I fucked it all up.”

There was no one coming down the path, no one hovering at the treeline or picking their way down the fork to the lawn. Not that it mattered. Dick never looked. His focus was on Tim.

“I didn’t try hard enough with Jason. And when you came, I thought, this is it. This is my chance to do better.”

“You did,” Tim whispered, not meaning to. He’d been so worried Dick wouldn’t like him, that he would reject him or be angry that Bruce had made him Robin. But instead Dick had accepted him from the

start and made him feel wanted. Until he didn't.

Dick was shaking his head again. "I didn't. If I had, you wouldn't have left. I didn't think you would leave, because I never thought you needed Robin to stay."

Oh.

"If I'd been better, you would've known that you were family. That we were your home." Dick exhaled heavily and wiped at his eyes. "That stupid costume could burn to ash and it wouldn't mean anything."

"He tried to kill me." Tim's confession was quiet but pointed. He was struggling under the weight of everything he was feeling, everything Dick had said, and the pit of hurt that still remained between them. "Damian. He tried to kill me. Multiple times."

It hadn't been a game or a feint or a test or even a threat. Damian had tried to kill Tim in his own home, and it had been too much.

"I know."

The words sent a queasy jolt up Tim's spine. "You knew?"

Dick sat back down heavily on the bench. Tim stayed standing. "I found out. Later." He looked up at Tim, face creased and shoulders bowed. "It's why I stopped asking you to come back. I thought… if you just stayed away a little longer, I could make sure you would be safe."

His gaze drifted to Tim's abdomen, to the side where the scar lay hidden, and his expression crumpled again. "I thought—No. I didn't think I was doing the right thing. I just… I didn't know what else to do."

Punish Damian. Kick him out. Take back Robin and give it to Tim.

But those weren't the right answers either, were they. Tim of six months ago would have thought so. Tim of six months ago hadn't gone toe to toe with Ra's al Ghul, hadn't seen the place Damian had called home. Then, and since then, Tim had learned too much about how the League raised their young and what it meant to be an al Ghul.

"I should have believed you," Dick rasped. "That Bruce was alive. I should've believed you."

Yes.

“No one else did either,” Tim allowed. No one. Not Alfred or Clark or Barbara or a single other person. They had all let him down. That hurt, at least, had dulled over time.

Dick shook his head, his face a ruin. “I’m your brother. I should’ve believed you. I’m so sorry, Tim.”

He’d said so before. That Tim had to give him—Dick didn’t shy from an apology when he felt it was due. It hadn’t meant much before. How could it, when it was given with Tim’s R on another boy’s chest and the door to his home closed to him? Maybe it felt like it meant something now because Tim knew he was right. Or because Dick was curled up like if he pulled back his shoulders, his heart would crack all across the path.

Or maybe it didn’t matter why the apology meant more now, just that it did.

Tim took a step toward the bench. He wasn’t sure what he would do when he reached it. Not hug Dick. They weren’t there yet. Sit down again maybe. Give it another go. Or maybe grab his cup and leave. But he made it that one step, then stopped.

Dick’s leg was bouncing, a jittery ratatattat of movement. Nothing else moved, just the leg, but it meant a lot when it was the leg of a Batman.

“Do you want to take a walk?”

They weren’t supposed to leave the bench. Neither Bruce nor Alfred had actually said so, but it was Strongly Implied. The bench was carefully chosen, the area scoped out and vetted. They were supposed to sit on the bench, say their piece, and emerge one happy, unified family. But Dick looked like he was about to vibrate out of his own skin.

“Yes,” Dick breathed in a rush and stood. “This way?”

It didn’t matter, so Tim nodded. Dick picked up both cups from the bench and offered Tim’s. Tim declined. The drinks were emptied out into the grass and the cups ferried to a nearby recycling bin.

Dick grimaced. “I thought maybe a drink would give me something to do with my hands. Guess it didn’t matter.” He sniffled, his face

already beginning to dry.

They began to walk. It felt strange, walking shoulder to shoulder after so long apart. It felt stranger to walk in silence. Not that Dick couldn't be quiet sometimes, but usually he was because he was letting Tim talk. Or, at least, that's how it had been, the two of them switching off to fill the quiet with whatever came to mind. Tim had liked that about Dick, about all of the Waynes. They hadn't made him feel like a burden for having something to say.

Now, Tim couldn't have thought of something to say if his life were on the line. He was too aware of the tension between them that even Dick's outburst hadn't dissipated, and the way his gut continued to churn.

He didn't realize what he was waiting for until he found himself studying Dick out of the corner of his eye. They had walked for over half an hour in complete silence, and Dick's mask had returned, but the muscles in his forearms were tense.

"You're still angry," Tim murmured.

Dick glanced at him, surprised. "Yes." And it seemed Tim was wrong about the mask, because he could see every emotion play across Dick's face–the anger, but also sorrow, frustration, and no small portion of misery.

Dick cocked his head thoughtfully, then added, "I'll probably always be angry, just a little."

Tim's stomach twisted and he fumbled for the first reason he could think of. "Because Bruce kicked you out? I didn't ask him to do that."

Dick stopped walking entirely. "What? No. Is that what you think?"

Tim nodded.

"No. Tim. I—" Dick pursed his lips as he weighed what he wanted to say. "I was angry when Bruce called, yes. Not at you. At him, for throwing us out, at first. The Manor is the only home Damian's known in Gotham. And it was mine, too."

Bitterness rose again in Tim's chest, a high-water line cresting in his throat, but Dick huffed, and it sounded choked and wet.

"I don't think I got it, how bad it really was, until Bruce called. He

said you needed to stay and that you wouldn't if we were there. That you didn't feel safe to stay, if we were there. Is that true?"

The bitterness curdled into sour nausea. He didn't want to answer this, didn't want to crack open his chest and show Dick just how little of his heart was left. But Dick was watching him, not pressing but waiting as still and patient as stone. He wouldn't move until Tim answered.

Tim nodded, a curt jerk of the chin.

Dick looked at the distance between them, the space Tim had casually preserved to keep him just out of arm's reach. Then he looked away, cheek twitching as he fought to keep his lip from quivering.

"And when you—" Dick gestured at his side when he could speak again, at the place where Tim had been cut open. "When you were hurt, is that why you didn't come to us for help? Because you thought…"

Tim shook his head quickly. "I was abroad." That, at least, was true. And Jason would never tell about the multiple nights Tim had crawled through the safehouse window, bleeding and bruised. Dick didn't need to know.

Dick was studying him as if he knew anyways, as if he could see every time Tim had thought about leaving Jason's window closed, fading back into the night, and letting Gotham finish him off.

"I remember going to your mother's funeral and watching you." Dick's words were a whisper, soft as snow on the ground. "I remember thinking… I've never seen a kid look so alone as this one. I wanted to take you and never give you back."

He sort of had, him and Bruce. Tim had stayed at the Manor for over three weeks that winter, until Jack had returned from Tokyo. Those three weeks had been some of the happiest weeks of Tim's life. His mother was dead, but he'd had a home to borrow, a family to steal. He'd felt horrible to be so content but it hadn't stopped him. Even later, when Jack had died, Tim had mourned, but he'd moved on. Only after Bruce had died, when everything had fallen apart, did Tim wonder if he had caused it all to happen somehow, if his horrible happiness had boomeranged with karmic swiftness.

He had ached in those months, until the pain grew unbearable. Then he had cut himself off from even himself. He had ruthlessly

disconnected every emotion, every thought, every impulse that wasn't bringing Bruce back. Even now, he wasn't all there. Jason had seen it. Bruce and Alfred, too, to an extent, and they'd worried for him.

He couldn't explain to them how scared he was to return to himself. Growing up alone had been nothing compared to finding a home and then losing it all.

He couldn't lose it all again.

He couldn't lose them all again.

"Tim," Dick said. He took a careful step forward, then another. Tim felt frozen in place, his heart hammering just shy of a panic attack.

Dick placed a hand on his cheek, like a benediction, like a kiss. "I'm sorry for leaving you so alone."

Tim shattered.

He fell to his knees in the middle of the path, his head filled with the cacophony of his own wheezing sobs. He hurt. He *hurt*. Every wound, every bruise, every moment of screaming loneliness and grief seemed to press into the meat of him, crushing his lungs, rending his heart. Six months of catatonia, of numbness, lifted.

Alone.

He had been all alone.

But not anymore. There were arms around him, enveloping him, rocking gently back and forth in rhythm with a heart that beat steady and sure. Lips pressed against his hair, breath warm on his scalp as Dick murmured, "It's okay, it's okay, I've got you," again and again. A hand rubbed up and down his back, the thumb tracing the curve of his spine and the rise and fall of his vertebrae. Tears ran down the back of his neck, soaking his collar, a match for the shirt that pressed crumpled and soggy beneath his face.

A long time later—how long, Tim would never be sure—they let go and rose, embarrassed and self-conscious, to creep out of the way of the joggers and dogwalkers who passed quickly by and pretended not to see.

A bench waited, not their bench but its twin, under the shade of a thin and crooked tree. They sat on it, clinging to its solidity like a lifeboat,

and tried to dry their swollen faces.

Dick broke the silence. “I should’ve kept my drink,” he croaked, and Tim hiccuped a laugh through his equally wrecked throat.

“What was it, some awful seaweed-acai thing?”

“Just an iced tea, you Baja Blast barbarian.”

Tim snorted another laugh and rubbed his forearm across his eyes. It felt good to laugh over something stupid, and he savored the feeling as long as he could. But Tim had never been good at ignoring the questions that needed to be asked.

“So. What now?”

Dick didn’t pretend not to understand. They might have made progress here today, but there was still a long way to go.

“I don’t know.”

Tim looked away, heart sinking, then looked back again when Dick’s arm slung across his shoulders.

“That’s okay, though. We don’t have to know. We’ll figure it out, alright? You and me and everyone else. Together.”

Tim nodded shakily. Together seemed like an impossible word when it included him and Damian. But *together* meant Bruce and Alfred, too. And Cass, though she wasn’t part of the problem. She was family. And maybe… maybe even Jason, if he’d let them. He’d caught Tim at his lowest. Tim owed him a way back in, even if it meant hauling him through a few windows of his own.

“Hey.” Dick leaned forward and pressed his forehead to Tim’s, one hand gripping the back of Tim’s neck. “We’ve got this, baby brother. Whatever it takes, we’ll get through it. Because of who we are.”

Nightwing and Robin, Tim’s heart completed with a bright thrill. But no, that was wrong. He wasn’t… They weren’t…

Dick’s grip tightened, but his eyes were soft. “We’re Waynes. No matter what.”

Tim wrapped a hand around Dick’s wrist and made himself believe. Dick wouldn’t let him fall again. “No matter what.”

Chapter End Notes

1) Because I don't trust like that, let me be clear. Dick 100% *thinks* he didn't do enough for Jason the first time around. Dick Grayson is also very much his father's son and has a guilt complex a country mile wide. ¯_(ツ)_/¯ I can't fix every single issue here and now, y'all.

2) The referenced memory of Janet's funeral and a portion of the weeks after can be found here: https://archiveofourown.org/series/1331768

3) Please note the updated chapter count at long last. One epilogue to go, and we're out.

Chapter 16: Epilogue

Chapter Summary

> *Eight months and two days ago, Bruce Wayne died. Very few knew, the privileged and the heartbroken. The world moved on.*

Chapter Notes

> ETA: Beautiful final chapter fanart courtesy of @alinyonka on Tumblr!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eight months and two days ago, Bruce Wayne died. Very few knew, the privileged and the heartbroken. The world moved on.

Six months and fourteen days later, Bruce Wayne returned. His life had been lived in his absence, his city and his family doing their best to patch over the gaping hole he had left behind.

For one month and eleven days since, Bruce Wayne had set himself to the task of tending to the wound. The necrosis that had set in was acknowledged at last and debrided, the lingering pain salved, the scar tissue encouraged to heal.

It had been a struggle for him, at first, to let go of the Before. It always was. Bruce wanted his old life back, imperfect though it had been. He wanted his family at peace, his children content, his world in order. But his life too often had been bisected into Befores and Afters for him to ignore the truth—there was no going back. Even in a universe with time travel and vortexes that could swallow a life whole, Bruce couldn't change what had passed in his absence, try though he did. So, instead, he turned his focus and his will to shaping his new After.

The issue of Robin was the first major obstacle to establishing a baseline of normalcy for everyone. Robin—the title and what it represented, what its mantle and who bore it meant to them all—was the splinter festering beneath the skin. Discussions were held—between Bruce and Tim, Bruce and Dick, Bruce and Damian, Dick and Damian, Dick and Tim. It was exhausting and draining, but Bruce held to his word that the solution would only come from a discussion from all of them rather than a unilateral decision handed down from on high.

And the solution was this: Tim would return as Robin for one month and then would pass the mantle to Damian. It was crude but effective, allowing Tim to regain his title and bid it goodbye properly and under his own agency without erasing decisions that had already been made.

In the end, even their inelegant solution required improvisation. As it turned out, Tim had grown at last, a small but significant collection of inches that no one had thought to mark. The Robin suit had no longer fit. Bruce had sat with his son in the Cave, a hand on his back as Tim wept. They had gone out anyways, Bruce's first time as Batman since his disappearance, but with Red Robin at his side and Robin mysteriously absent from the city skyline.

It was a different sort of leavetaking than Bruce had experienced before. With Dick, the end of Robin had been a choice and had come with warning, but Bruce had thought that end was the final bow for Robin forever. He had had no way to predict the rise of Nightwing or the arrival of a stubborn boy with quick fists and a bright smile. With Jason, Bruce had thought that was the end of everything—of Robin, of Jason himself, of Batman, of Bruce's ability to function. It had been sudden and violent and horrible… and Tim had saved him.

And now, it was time to say goodbye again. Instead of a month, Tim was given only a week, but it was a week of clear skies and no one but him and Bruce. It made Bruce's stomach knot, knowing each night was one he wouldn't get back again, but he appreciated the time to know, the time to prepare, the time to savor. They were nights he would never forget.

At the end of the week, Dick and Damian were invited to the Cave. There was an elaborate ceremony, orchestrated by Tim, to mark the official passing of the domino. Damian hated it, the symbolism of his position being benevolently *gifted* rather than earned, and the taste of being handed an elder sibling's ill-fitting handmedowns lingering rank in his mouth. And Tim had hated giving up that piece of himself and of knowing that any chance of going back was gone forever, taken not by human hands but by time itself. It was, Bruce thought with no small sadness, the mark of a proper compromise that no one was leaving truly satisfied.

It wasn't something he could let himself dwell on for long. Time continued to move in its unalterable path, dragging them along with it, and there was still so much more to be done.

Bruce knew wounds. He knew damage. His body bore scars that

lingered, and his heart carried aches that lasted even longer. He knew the healing wasn't done. It would be, someday, to whatever extent reality would allow, though Bruce knew reality, too, and he knew how far he could make it bend to his will. But the signs of the process were there, slow and sometimes as painful as another wound, but present, and they at least were a time-born change that he welcomed.

Healing was Tim returning from the park, face red and blotchy but the anxious fidgeting of his fingers stilled for the first time in weeks. Bruce didn't know exactly what was said at that meeting, and he was content not to know. The peace between his sons was tenuous but holding, and he wouldn't interfere.

Bruce had taken Tim to the den and turned on the television. Neither had paid attention to what was playing. Tim had fallen asleep with his arm thrown across Bruce and his face buried in Bruce's side. Bruce had been too content to move and had fallen asleep with him.

The matter of Tim's apartment—and Tim's schooling—still needed to be dealt with. Not now. One day at a time was all Bruce had to contend with, the vortex gone forever, and he savored each as it came.

Healing was Clark appearing on the Manor's doorstep, somber and pensive, seeking not Bruce, but Tim. That was another conversation Bruce wasn't privy to, conducted out of earshot during a walk across the Manor lawn, and then further afield, in the Watchtower with the rest of the League. It was a strange feeling, to step aside and let his son and his best friend sort out their differences between themselves like men. It made Bruce grateful all over again that he had chosen a brother he could trust to reach for the right thing, and to make amends when that reach fell short.

Healing was watching Cassandra slowly blossom in the presence of her family. She was his little burr again, as she had been her first time at the Manor, but Bruce was more deliberate now about putting her in the path of the others. Alfred and Tim knew her best now, living under the same roof, but Dick was making the effort to reach out as well, and Cass and Damian had proven to be a surprisingly effective pair on patrol. Trust would be slow to appear, the steady creep of wisteria rather than the dazzling burst of marigolds, but it would come. He knew it would come.

For his part, Bruce knew his disappearance had left its own wounds on his girl, wounds he could only begin to heal by being present to receive whatever Cass needed to give him in any particular day.

Morning might begin with a kiss on the cheek, pressed while Bruce sat slumped and fuzzy with sleep at the breakfast table. The same day might find him grunting in the Cave as Cass landed blow after blow, her young face blank with fury. And then even later, Bruce would sit bemused and distracted from his paperwork, Cass sprawled on the rug in his den, forehead furrowed with focus as she poked at the vein on the side of his foot for no reason he could discern.

She carried his name now. Bruce had explained the concept of adoption and what it would mean as best he could, Cass's second day back in Gotham. He couldn't bear to delay longer. He had waited too long already, before, and Cassandra had been the one to bear the consequences. She was his daughter, a claim cemented by heart and not by law, but now he would be able to protect her forever, even from the grave. Her place was here, in Gotham, in the Manor, and every time Bruce caught sight of her, another knot of tension in his chest unwound.

Healing was setting aside time just for Damian, so Bruce and his youngest could acquaint themselves with each other anew. Bruce was introduced to the kitten at last, a small tuxedoed ball of fur and fangs that liked to curl up in Bruce's palm and chew on his thumb until it bled. Bruce was careful never to wince or twitch. Damian would watch his face like a hawk for any sign of anger or discomfort, ready to snatch his precious pet out of danger. That was another slow-blooming area he would have to tend with care and precision.

They were still balanced on the slender support of the olive branch Bruce had offered that night at the bus stop, but Bruce hoped that, with time, he would be able to guide them both to more stable ground. Damian was… Damian was Damian, in the end. Bruce saw very little of himself in the boy and too much of Talia, but Damian was his own mixture of interests and foibles, strengths and insecurities. More than that, he was Bruce's son. He was worth the work.

Healing was finding a way to recalibrate the balance of his relationships with his elder sons, both so dear to him. Dick, for his part, was a little easier. Their night clearing the air had helped, as did the understanding that Bruce wasn't planning on second-guessing Dick's choices. What was done was done.

Easier, but not always easy. They both wanted what was best for the family, for the city, but, as was often the case, they had conflicting ideas about what that was. There were more fights, these carefully

conducted away from all other ears, though none as explosive as their first. There were more quiet moments, too, where Bruce sat hip to hip with his eldest and discussed options as peers, as friends. Both kinds of moments he made sure to end with a hand on the shoulder, a word of affection, a kiss to the temple. Open-ended, festering disagreements were no longer an option between them. Bruce was so proud of the man his boy, his first Robin, had become.

Jason was harder. Not because of Jason himself so much, but because their initial reconciliation had yet to come. There was still hurt there, a still-gaping wound crusted at the edges with distrust, anger, and bitterness. It was a laceration Bruce had been unable to stitch in the Before and was at a loss to heal in the After.

Except…

Except Bruce had died, just as Jason had said he wanted, and Bruce didn't think he had imagined the way Jason had looked at him that night in the diner parking lot. He hadn't imagined Jason taking care of Tim in his absence, or saving his life that horrible, endless night. It gave him hope, where he hadn't felt hope in so long.

It was that hope that carried him back to the diner, not just on the nights where he hurt so badly he felt like he could barely breathe, but night after night, week after week. It was that hope that kept him scouring the skyline for a familiar flash of red, that made him speak when it was safer, easier, to keep silent.

Most nights, he sat alone in the diner. He spoke to a turned shoulder, disappearing into the shadows, a flipped bird flung in its wake. But sometimes Jason came. Sometimes Jason listened. Sometimes he would even respond, and Bruce would get to hear his son bark out a hard laugh at whatever misstep Bruce had made, and that was a gift. Dead boys didn't laugh.

They were uneasy allies, for now, Red Hood's tentative truce with the masks of Gotham weathering the exchanging of the cowl and the reappearance of Nightwing. It was something. It was a start. It was more than Bruce could have imagined, before his death.

Healing was Alfred as the silver thread that strung the jewels of Bruce's life together performing a subtle alchemy that Bruce knew he hadn't yet fully grasped. The changes were small but unmistakable. Alfred teaching Cassandra and Tim to cook, where before the kitchen had been his sacred realm. Alfred going out for lunch with Jason and

declaring he was doing so with a glint in his eye that dared anyone to question him. (No one did.) Alfred, stopping by Bruce to rest a hand on the back of his head as he chipped away at paperwork, as if Bruce were a little boy again, in need of moral support during homework.

Bruce didn't understand, nor did he try. He didn't need to. Whatever was happening, whatever Alfred was doing, it was for the best, because Alfred was the one doing it. And because it brought a sense of peace to the man who had raised him, peace that Bruce hadn't even realized was missing until it returned once more.

Healing was weekly dinners at the Manor, instituted the week after Cass's return home. Attendance was expected, and every Sunday afternoon, the family would gather, scooped out of their various corners and placed elbow to elbow around the little-used table in the rear dining room that bordered the lawn.

The first dinner had been stiff and uncomfortable. The second had been little better. Even now, there was more silence than conversation, and some evenings ended much earlier than others. Theirs was not the easy companionship of an idyllic family dinner. Not yet. Maybe not ever, not in that way. They were hardly an idyllic family. But every week, the table was set, the seats filled, and the effort began again. That was healing. The empty chair, pointedly placed between Tim and Alfred, its place set but not yet used, that was healing, too. Someday, it would be filled, their tableau complete.

So many hurts. So much left to set to right. But so much to be grateful for as well.

That one's mine, Bruce thought, hushed with awe as he caught Tim's dark head ducking down to hide a laugh.

That one's mine, as he lifted a softly snoring Cass from the couch and carried her to bed.

That one's mine, as Damian sprinted down the park path ahead of him, tracking the flight of a bird that had caught his eye.

That's one's mine, as Dick leaned across the back of Bruce's chair, arm brushing his shoulder to point to a line on the screen.

That one's mine, as Jason wrapped his fingers around a chipped coffee mug and gave him a wry almost-smile in the warped reflection of the security mirror behind the counter.

One month and eleven days ago, Bruce Wayne came back from the dead. Today was day forty-two. He couldn’t wait for day forty-three.

Chapter End Notes

The end. :) For real this time.

I couldn't fix every issue this family has, because I can't work miracles and also there's no such thing as an issue-free family—not in fic, and not in real life. But they'll keep growing. They'll keep healing. And that's something to appreciate, I think. (Case in point, I realized halfway through this epilogue that, in many ways, The Return and the new tradition established here is something I already knew. It appears again in this fic: https://archiveofourown.org/works/20856140)

Thanks to everyone who stuck with this meandering little fic for the last year and a half. Especially since it was this *particular* last year and a half. I hope you all are safe, healthy, and well. May your own healing journeys progress apace.

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